

P.O.W.S
AT
CHIGGER LAKE



A Novel of WW II Oklahoma
Complete With
400 Italian Prisoners of War

Jack Shakely

P.O.W.s
AT
CHIGGER LAKE

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AUTHOR'S NOTE



This is a story of a fictional Italian POW camp in Oklahoma. There were dozens of German prisoner of war camps in Oklahoma during World War II, but the only Italian prisoners of war in the state were at the POW hospital in Okmulgee. Camp Chigger Lake is loosely based on an Italian prisoner of war camp in Monticello, Arkansas.

Outside of that, everything else in the book is pretty much right on the money. Well, except the people. They're fictional. And Mrs. Evan's okra-based Chili Gumbo. I made that up, too. Weleetka is real, though. I grew up there.



By February 3, 1943 every deciduous leaf in Georgia had fallen from its branch.

The resulting relentless landscape left the stately red brick administration building of the Fort Benning Officers' Candidate School looking more like a Bronte orphanage than the antebellum plantation its architects had envisioned.

Freshly-minted Second Lieutenant Tom Gregory sat on the wooden railing of the building's porch, waiting for the soldiers on duty to arrive. Watching the ragtag explosion of tents and barracks below, Tom felt that it all looked like a botched movie set—Tara on *Wuthering Heights*, perhaps. Wartime Fort Benning was now a tar-paper city of structures slapped up overnight to house the thousands of new officers, known as “Ninety-Day Wonders,” being trained and shipped overseas. Tom welcomed the graceful mansion as a reminder that beauty transcends wars. Lord knows the rest of the buildings could crumble to dust and nobody would lift a finger.

Lieutenant Gregory had the jet-black hair and dark complexion that were clues to his Italian heritage. He was handsome in an Everyman sort of way. A college classmate once told him he should take up a life of crime, because nobody would be able to pick him out of a line-up. “Wouldn't it be a lot easier on the police if I just broke my nose?” Tom had asked.

He had a lanky, athletic build. In combat boots, as he was that day, he looked even taller than his six-foot frame.

Gripping the rail, Tom's face was etched with the small but constant pain that he knew signaled serious, perhaps permanent problems. He had recently come off bivouac where he had badly twisted his knee again,

kicking up an old football injury. His knee throbbed, made even worse by the wet, all-the-way-to-the-bone chill of a typical Georgia winter.

Tom could see his breath in the early morning air. When he came to Georgia he'd expected to see magnolias and Spanish moss and cotton bales like in his high school textbooks back home. But the cold and relentless brown sameness of the Army camp numbed him. Row after row of dun-colored barracks, each with one miserable tree planted in an old jeep tire, were lined up in perfect symmetry. Hundreds of one-story buildings hugged the streets, their khaki tar paper roofs and walls sucking the color out of everything. Aside from the cold, the only ways Tom could tell it was winter were the bare branches on the tiny trees and the gray sky that seemed to hover only a few feet above the barracks. Tom wondered if those branches ever bore leaves, or whether some colonel had decided that dead trees were more efficient.

"Stunning vista, huh, Lieutenant?" came a voice behind him.

Tom turned to see a bespectacled captain about his age. No surprise there; everybody except the generals and colonels seemed to be about his age. Although he had never actually seen a general yet except in newsreels, and frankly, he was in no hurry.

"Good morning, Captain," Tom said, and saluted awkwardly. "Yes sir, I was just thinking, this is the third Army base I've been on and they're all exactly alike—same size, same color, same little trees in tires, turn left and there's the officers' mess, turn right and there's the P.X."

"You ought to go to Fort Polk. The little trees are all on the right side of the streets there and the tires are painted white." The captain chuckled. "I guess Army camps are like Tolstoy's happy families: all the same."

"Good point," Tom said. He had picked up the habit of saying this when he didn't have the slightest idea what other people were talking about. It had gotten him through two years of college.

The Captain flipped open the small manila folder Tom handed him. "You are Lieutenant Gregory? You're up bright and early. I'm Captain Champion." He offered his hand. "Call me Walt. All this yes sir, no sir stuff goes against my better nature. Your first name's Tom, right? Mind if I call you Tom?"

Tom took the extended hand. "Shoot no. Truth is, I've only been a full-fledged officer for five days and I'm still trying to get the hang of it."

"I know what you mean. Every time some enlisted man salutes me, I instinctively look over my shoulder. Come on in. I've got all your assignment papers ready to go."

Inside, the décor could best be described as Early Quonset Hut. Dozens of gray steel desks filled the center of the cavernous room, flanked on every side by rows of filing cabinets. Taped to some of the cabinets were posters with stark graphics and starker warnings: "Shh, Tojo is Listening!" and "Loose Lips Sink Ships."

When they got to the Captain's desk, he spread Tom's folder in front of him, and reached for another, much larger one. "Have a seat, Tom. Look, I've got some news that may disappoint you at first. It says here you tore your knee up on the obstacle course a couple of weeks ago. Third time, right?"

"Something like that, I guess." Tom was being noncommittal because it was the fourth time since he had initially blown his knee in a college football game the autumn before. When the doctor told him it was unlikely he would ever play football again, he went down the same week and enlisted. His coach told him that because of his R.O.T.C. training, he'd be a cinch to become an officer, but the trick knee might sour the deal. "*Ixnay* on the *ee-knay*," his coach had poetically put it.

"It says here you're Italian-American. Gregory doesn't sound very Italian," Champion observed. "Can you speak the language?"

"Only so-so, I'm afraid. My family name is actually Gregorio, but my father anglicized it just after the First World War. My father wouldn't let us speak Italian around the house, so my command of the language is mostly limited to curse words and street songs I picked up from my grandparents. That and menus. I'm crackerjacks at menus."

Tom's face grew serious and he leaned forward in his chair. "But ... Walt, I was hoping that didn't make any difference. When I came here to Fort Benning, they told me I'd never have to go into combat in Italy. They were real nice about it. I sort of assumed I'd be headed for the Pacific. What does it say in my folder?"

The Captain studied the folder for a second, avoiding eye contact. "Tom, I'm sorry, but with that knee, you're never going into combat, period. I'm afraid you are going to be spending the duration stateside, just like me with my damned eyes. You're being reassigned from artillery to the Adjutant General Corps; again just like me."

Tom slumped farther forward with a groan. "I was supposed to be a tank commander."

"Now don't look so gloomy. Your country needs you, buddy." Champion gave a little bark that had been intended as a laugh, but fell

short. "We're in the same boat. Somebody's got to do the paperwork. Did you know that for every man in combat, there are three of us away from the front, making sure he has what he needs, and when he needs it? It's not glamorous, but essential. And as far as you are concerned, it just might be damned interesting. Ever been to Oklahoma?"

"No," Tom answered. "Why, are the bases down there a different color?"

Champion laughed again, this time for real. "Can't say for sure. But this one might speak a different language, at least. Maybe your grandfather's cuss words are going to come in handy. Look, I'll give you this whole folder in just a minute. Everything's in there. You are going to be pretty much on your own for a while, but maybe that will give you a chance to see some of the sights. First thing you're going to do is report to the supply depot and railroad yards at Raleigh, North Carolina. Hang around there for a couple of days. It's gorgeous. Durham's just up the road—that's where Duke and the University of North Carolina are. Most beautiful women in the world, they say. Did you go to college, Tom?"

"Uh-huh, Thiel College in Greenville, Pennsylvania."

Champion smiled in recognition. "Say, I've heard of Thiel. You guys play Slippery Rock in football. I can remember every Saturday at Ohio State they'd announce the score of the Slippery Rock game. Seems they were always playing Thiel. No offense. It's just that Slippery Rock is a pretty funny name for a college."

Tom wanted to mention that it was a defensive lineman from Slippery Rock who had blind-sided him just as he was planting his foot to catch the ball, a tackle that was about to send him and his knee to—where? Oklahoma? "What do I do after I get to Raleigh?" he asked instead.

"You are supposed to accompany a shipment of war supplies to Camp Gruber, Oklahoma."

"Camp Goober?" Tom asked, nonplussed. "What kind of war materiel could they possibly need at a place called Camp Goober?"

"It's *Gruber*, Tom. They named it after the guy who wrote 'When the Caissons Go Rolling Along.' Kind of running low on names for camps, I guess." The captain shrugged. "And I don't know what you're picking up in Raleigh. You won't know either until you get there, just in case those Duke coeds try to torture it out of you. But I do know what you'll be doing *after* you get to Oklahoma," he said.

"Can you tell me, or do you think the Indians might try to torture me, too?"

"There haven't been any reports of that," Champion said. His features became serious. "No, you're going to be doing something nobody in the history of America has ever done before. You've got orders to build, and then command, an Italian prisoner of war camp."



“Cigarettes?” Tom Gregory stared at the manifest sheet in disbelief. “I’ve been sent down here on a secret mission to escort some cigarettes?”

The supply sergeant handed Tom a clipboard. “I don’t make the rules, Lieutenant,” he said around a wad of chewing gum. “I told the generals I was tired of doing that. Now I just follow them, same as you. You really didn’t know what we had in here? You may be the only one. This warehouse full of cigarettes is probably the worst-kept secret in the Army. The Midnight P.X. has been doing a land-office business. I’ll be glad to be shed of them. And if I were you, I’d count my cargo real good. Them things are worth their weight in gold, and you’re about to hit pay dirt: one thousand cases, twenty-four thousand cartons or—as Bill Stern would say, ‘If you’re keeping score at home’—damn near five million cigarettes.”

Tom wasn’t mollified. “Well, I still think it’s a rotten thing to do, and the waste of a good officer.”

“Ah, come down off your high horse, Lieutenant. You want rotten? Go talk to that Lieutenant over there. He’s shipping out on the same train. Sign this, and good luck.”

Tom walked slowly up to the other officer. He was sitting at a makeshift table, drinking a Pepsi Cola and making notes on some forms in front of him. He was apple-cheeked and looked young enough to be playing hooky from school.

“Good morning, Lieutenant,” Tom extended his hand. “I understand we’re going to be travelling companions. My name’s Tom Gregory.”

“Rob Luke,” the other man answered, biting the end of his pencil in thought.

Where you headed?” Tom asked.

"I'm on my way to Camp Chaffee and then wherever these things send me." He waved the small sheaf of paper. "I'm on casket escort duty, again. You too?"

Tom had heard about this at officers' school. Starting in 1942, the Army no longer sent telegrams to the families whose sons were killed in action. Now the news was delivered in person, and later the coffin was escorted to the local funeral home, almost always by a junior officer of the Adjutant General Corps.

"No, I've got a much dumber assignment, I'm afraid," Tom said. He shuddered involuntarily. "Jeez, I'm sorry, Rob. It must be rough."

"Oh, don't worry. You'll probably get your chance to find out. I can see by your insignia you're A.G. This is my third bereavement assignment, and I've only been an officer for three months. At least this is better than delivering the telegram. At least the families know he's dead by this time." Lieutenant Luke stared down at the pile of papers. "This is the worst duty God ever invented." He looked back up into Tom's face, with a dry-eyed toughness that caught Tom off guard. "I'd like to say 'why me?' you know, but I know exactly why me."

"What do you mean?"

"Take a look at this face," Luke said. "My parish priest used to say I had a face just like one of those cherubs in those old-timey paintings. I guess the Army must think so, too. So they send this rosy-cheeked cherub up to the front door." He laughed dryly. "The families inside aren't supposed to suspect that I'm really the Angel of Death. But it doesn't really fool most folks. Do you know I've actually had them faint dead away on the front porch just seeing me drive up in the car? One man even pulled a shotgun on me, said I was the worst kind of liar, and that when his son got home, they'd both give me what for. That's what he said, 'what for,' like I was in grade school and needed a spanking. Sometimes I feel like I deserve one, like it's partly my fault the guy's dead."

"I guess I never really thought about the home front part of the war," Tom admitted. "I thought I was headed overseas. Now I'm just beginning to realize how deep this war goes, backwards and forward. And you want to hear backwards? I'm about to keep the world safe for democracy by going to Oklahoma."

"You're going to Camp Gruber, I bet."

Tom eyed the innocent-faced lieutenant suspiciously. Maybe I've already talked too much, he thought, then replied, "I really can't say. Why, what makes you say that?"

"Oh, you know, there's two types of communications—telephone and tell a lieutenant. There's been all kind of talk about German and Italian prisoner of war camps being set up all over America, mostly in Kansas, Texas and Oklahoma, I hear. A couple of my buddies from A.G. school up at Fort Benjamin Harrison are already at Gruber. You know what I hear? I hear there are more than two hundred thousand of them headed this way. And a bunch of them are hard-shell Nazis from Rommel's North African Army. Can you imagine? What's going to happen when those cowboys find out they got Nazis in their backyards?"

"Well, we're not supposed to make a big deal out of it, I know that much," Tom said. "The camps are all supposed to be pretty small and sprinkled all over the place, mostly stuck back in the woods, out of sight. I guess that's why they picked Oklahoma. I understand there's tons of backwoods there."

They talked all day and most of the night on the train to Little Rock, careful to discuss their respective assignments only when they could not be overheard. This proved to be seldom, because the train was almost always filled with noisy servicemen, some coming home on furlough, others heading out to camps they'd never heard of. Every-body wanted to talk, afraid to be left with his thoughts for too long.

They talked about things that were vitally important to young men.

"If you had to pick, which Andrew Sister would it be—Patty, Maxene or LaVerne?" Tom asked.

"Patty, if all you want is a date," Rob said. "But she might be too wild for the long run. For getting married, I think I'll stick with Maxene."

"What about LaVerne?"

A sailor in dress blues popped his head up from the seat behind. "She's out. My daddy told me never to marry a woman with a voice lower than yours."

"That leaves out Veronica Lake, then," Rob said.

"Say, that's right," Tom said. "Sailor, you tell your daddy that with all due respect, I'll take Veronica Lake and he can have, let's see—Shirley Temple. But this leads us to a more important question: does Betty Grable really love Harry James or is she just hot for trumpet players?"

"I'm hoping it's mustaches," Rob said seriously. "I can't play the trumpet but I've been thinking about growing a mustache."

"Glad you told us, Lieutenant Peachfuzz," said the sailor. "We'll be sure to check back in a while to see how you're doing. Of course Betty Grable will be a grandmother by then, but still."

They got rip-roaring drunk that night, even the real young ones. Regardless of the legal drinking age, every state allowed men and women in uniform to drink liquor. The unspoken understanding was that if you were old enough to die, you were old enough to drink.

Late that night Tom broke out a carton of cigarettes from his duffle and passed around packs to everybody. He didn't even know exactly why he had them, never having smoked more than the occasional celebratory cigar.

"Lucky Strike Greens," a Marine said. "I haven't seen any of these in months. I just assumed they were all over in England or North Africa."

"To the shores of Tripoli," sang the sailor loudly, and surprisingly on key. "I miss the old Greens. Those new ones just don't pack the punch, too girly for me."

"I hear all they really changed was the package," Tom said. "They had to pull them off the market, so I heard, because nobody would buy them after that 'Lucky Strike Green Has Gone to War' advertising campaign. It must have caught the cigarette company off guard. They couldn't sell Greens to the public anymore, so they dumped them on the War Department for ten cents on the dollar. Believe it or not, I'm escorting about two boatloads of these babies to Army camps in Oklahoma. They give them away at hospitals. Go figure. Hasn't the Army ever heard you can smoke yourself to death?"

"Yeah, if you're the third guy on the match," the sailor said, and suddenly turned solemn. "I got a feeling that where I'm headed, smoking is going to rank about ninety-fifth on the top one hundred things likely to kill me."

Everybody grew silent and stared at his own shoes.

Finally, Tom reached for the pint of Jack Daniel's Rob had smuggled onto the train. "Look, I'm the guy who seems to have blown out the candles on this birthday cake. What do you say we have a drink courtesy of my newest and dearest friend, Lieutenant Rob Luke, Adjutant General Corps, United States Army?"

"My pleasure. Think nothing of it," Rob mumbled and noisily threw up on the front of his dress blouse.

The next morning as they stood on the Little Rock train station platform, Tom faced a crestfallen Lieutenant Rob Luke.

"I'm sorry as hell about last night, Tom. I feel like Harry James is chasing the Andrew Sisters barefoot through my head playing the tuba. You know, that's the first time I ever got drunk in my whole life?"

"What a surprise," said Tom, whose head was listing a little toward starboard himself.

"Look, I gotta go all the way back to the last car. That's where they off-load the caskets," Rob said. "They don't want anybody to see them. So I'll say my goodbye here. Tom, let me ask you something. Do you think I might get assigned to command one of those prison camps? At least it would be part of the war, watching Germans and stuff, instead of this backwater death march. I just don't know how much more of this I can take."

"Frankly, I'm flying blind about the whole thing right now," Tom said. "But hell yes; I'd love to have you join me, Rob. When I get down to Gruber, I'll take a look around and give you a call. I know where you are: headquarters battalion at Camp Chafee, right? It shouldn't be so hard. Didn't you tell me last night that we're the ones who cut the orders?"

"Was that before or after I upchucked on you?" Rob laughed. "Yeah, we're the ones. Take it easy, Tom. Maybe we will bump into each other again."

Tom made the rest of the journey in silence. He got off the train at Muskogee, smack in the middle of one of those gorgeous false spring days that Indian Territory throws at you, begging you to take your coat off and relax while it busies itself making slush for a final blizzard.

There was no problem getting a ride to the camp. There were jeeps and trucks everywhere, ferrying men back and forth, even a few nurses headed for the hospital in Okmulgee.

"Welcome to Camp Gruber, Lieutenant," said the jeep driver over the motor roar, "the precise location God has chosen for a suppository."

“What are you talking about?” Tom shouted in reply. “This is one of the most beautiful places I’ve ever seen. What is that? Dogwood? We have dogwood back home.”

“Wouldn’t know—I’m from Jersey,” the driver yelled back. “It isn’t bad today, I got to admit. Smells real pretty, too. But I made the mistake of coming here last August. You know this camp was named for the guy who wrote that ‘Caissons’ song? Wait till July. You’ll find out where he got the line ‘hit the dusty trail.’”

When they arrived at the camp, Tom was disappointed to find that the tree-murdering colonels had been there, too. But instead of row after row of wooden barracks, there were hundreds of rows of eight-man tents. The whole place smelled like a giant tarpaulin. Only the headquarters and administrative buildings were permanent, although the sound of hammers and saws was everywhere.

Inside the administration office, Tom found a major sitting at a desk precariously piled with stacks of paper. The major was one of the skinniest men Tom had ever seen, with thick glasses that gave him an owlish look. Welcome to the Army of Glasses and Trick Knees, Tom thought. We also serve.

“Howdy, Lieutenant. I’m Major Appleton,” the man said amiably. “Thought I’d give you a ‘howdy’ just so you’d feel like you were in the Old West. Truth be known, I’ve never actually met any Oklahomans who say howdy, but I’m still holding out hope. I’m from Wisconsin myself. Sit down. Take a load off.”

He handed Tom about six inches’ worth of papers, pamphlets and booklets. “Here you go. When you’re through with those, I’ve got a couple of bookshelves more. Lieutenant, we’re pioneering here, which is Army for ‘we don’t know what the hell we’re doing.’ They told you at Benning that you’d be commanding a German prisoner of war camp, right?”

“Yes sir, but Italian, not German,” Tom said.

“Oh that’s right, you’re the one got the Italian camp. That should be quite a show. You’re virtually going to be starting from scratch. Well, we all are, I guess.”

The Major reached into the top drawer of his desk and pulled out a small booklet. “This is the most important thing I want you to read. No, not read—memorize every word. These are the articles of the 1929 Geneva Convention. There are ninety-seven of them, and I expect you to be able to repeat them in your sleep. I got to warn you, they’re going

to amaze you. At least they did me. Every single thing I thought I knew about the treatment of prisoners of war was wrong. Are you a student of such things?”

“Mostly just movies, I guess.”

“That’s a good place to start,” Major Appleton said. “Ever seen *Grand Illusion*?”

“One of my favorite movies of all time.”

“Mine, too,” said Appleton. “Remember that scene where the prisoner Jean Gabin escapes, keeps running up the stairs of the castle, taunting Erich Von Stroheim, so the other prisoners can get away? Von Stroheim threatens him and eventually shoots him dead? Touching scene. Know what would happen to you if you did that to one of your prisoners? You’d be sent to prison yourself, for murder.”

“But, but, I don’t understand,” Tom stammered. “What are you supposed to do if one of them escapes?”

“Run after them and catch them,” Appleton said. “And bring ‘em back, just like Frank Buck—alive. Look, by the time you’ve read all those articles on how we have to wash them and feed them, give them books and movies, you’re going to think you aren’t reading about prisoners of war anymore, but your country cousins who’ve just dropped in for a spot of tea. I’m sure you’ve been reading the same newspaper stories I have about how our men are being mistreated by the Germans, and especially the Japs, but the word from on high is we are going to bend over backwards to follow the Geneva Convention to the letter, even if it means breakfast in bed. If a single American soldier is tortured it won’t be because we started it first. Got that?”

“Yes sir. Sounds a lot more complicated than meets the eye. When do the prisoners start coming in, Major?”

“We’ve got about three months to get ready,” Appleton said. “The first batch should be arriving sometime this summer. And Lieutenant? It turns out the Germans and Italians hate each other as much as they hate us, so we’re going to have to keep them miles apart. You’ve got the only Italian camp, so we’re putting you in a town called Weleetka. That’s an Indian word, I think. It’s a real pretty little town; I’ve been there. I think you’ll like it just fine. You’re going to be converting an old Civilian Conservation Corps camp, so I guess you aren’t really starting from scratch after all. I’ll be able to spare you three or four enlisted men and you’ll have a nurse for the infirmary, but I want you to hire folks from

town as much as you can, both for construction and keeping the place up. And try to make the place not look like a prison. Plant some trees, stuff like that. And for God's sakes, don't string barbed wire all over every place, especially concertina wire. It doesn't really keep anybody in, and scares the townspeople something awful.

"Take your time when you get down there. Get to meet the local folks, the mayor, the editor of the paper, the high school principal. You can even live in town if you want to; your enlisted men will sleep at the camp. You are going to be pretty much on your own down there, and you're going to have to think on your feet. Don't forget, Gregory, the world is watching. Good luck, or should I say *buon fortuna*?"



When Tom stepped off the train at the immaculate little yellow and brown Weleetka station, there was already quite a crowd. He heard a low rhythmic keening from a knot of people at the end of the platform, an animal sound that he had never heard before but instinctively recognized. It was a dirge, in a language that sounded like it came from another planet. He put his duffle down and looked up at a man on a ladder replacing a light bulb. The man seemed to be the only one not coming or going.

"Excuse me," Tom said. "Are you the station master?"

The man atop the ladder had a pleasant face that looked like it had been carved out of hickory. "That would be the station *mistress*, and no, I'm not her. That's her down there with the Wingos." He pointed to the cluster of people. "They just brought the Wingo boy home from the war. They'll be taking him out by the lake, I reckon. I'm Floyd; I guess you could call me the handyman."

Tom's eyes scanned the platform. "Where's the officer that's supposed to be with the casket? And why haven't they taken it to the funeral home? It's Army regulations, they to deliver the young man to the funeral home."

The big man slowly descended the ladder, wiped his hands carefully on a shop rag in his back pocket, and extended his hand to Tom. Tom was glad to shake hands with someone. All the saluting seemed to him a constant warning to keep your distance.

"I'm Lieutenant Gregory," Tom said. "Pleased to meet you."

"Floyd Breedlove, Lieutenant. Most folks around here call me Breed," He smiled broadly. "That's cause I'm part Indian. I'm not telling you which part." He laughed at what was obviously an old and

time-tested piece of his self-introduction. "You are the only officer around here, and no offense, but there are a few things wrong with what you say, regulations or no. First off, the Wingos here aren't part Indian like me; they're full-blood Creek. Mrs. Wingo doesn't even speak English. And no full-blood Indian around these parts will go near a funeral home—just too much corpse dust floating around everywhere. The reason there aren't any other Army men around is because the minute they heard Bobby was dead—and an Army guy did bring that news—Old Man Wingo and one of his other sons hightailed it up to Camp Gruber to sit with his boy. Hear that singing? That'll go on now four days and nights while they make sure Bobby gets over proper-like."

"That sound is *singing*?" Tom asked. "That's got to be one of the saddest sounds I've ever heard."

"I guess that's kind of the whole idea," Floyd said. He looked down at Tom's duffle bag. "Can I give you a lift anywhere? I'm afraid I'm as close to a taxi as you are going to get around here."

"Actually, you can," Tom said. "I know what I need to see, but I have no idea where anything is. How would you like to work for the Army for a day? There's ten dollars in it."

"Heck, yes." Floyd laughed, picking up the over-stuffed duffle bag as if it were a sack of groceries and slinging it over his shoulder. "That's dang near as much as I made a month when I was a soldier back in the Great War."

They walked over to a 1939 dark green Pontiac with a fishing pole for an antenna.

"You were in World War One, Floyd?" Tom asked, determined not to use the other man's nickname. "You don't look old enough."

"Yes sir, Private First Class Breedlove, RA330816, at your orders. I was just sixteen, lied about my age a little, but they weren't looking too close. I was in Chateau Thierry when the Germans figured they ought to take a piece of me home with them. See?" He pulled his thick black hair back from his forehead to reveal a long white scar and an indentation almost an inch deep. "I'm kind of sorry they had to take some of my skull, though. My pappy always told me I didn't have enough brains to get in out of the rain even when I was a kid." He laughed again and threw Tom's duffle on the back seat. "The docs told me it was prefrontal something or another, and not to worry. I can't feel hot or cold much, is all, which is a blessing in this neck of the woods, believe me. Hop in, Lieutenant. Where to? It's your nickel."

"You know where the old Civilian Conservation Corps camp is?"

"Sure," Floyd said, "I ought to, I built most of it. It's on the other side of town, out by the lake. But it's pretty run-down now. Hasn't been anybody out there in years. Why in the world do you want to go there?"

"Well, it's still kind of in the planning stages, but the Army is thinking about reopening it as a work camp." Tom and his superiors had agreed not to tell anyone of the exact use of the C.C.C. camp until Tom could meet with the townspeople, especially the elected officials. He didn't need anyone's permission, of course, but he didn't want people to think they were getting this stuffed down their throats. "Make them think it's their idea," Major Appleton had said.

Floyd drove Tom across the creosoted wooden bridge that led from town, spanning a meandering sandy stream with the incongruous name of Big River. Big River was one of the standing jokes of the town and, as Tom would discover, fit perfectly into the Oklahoman sense of humor that prized exaggeration and the absurd.

"So how do you like Big River?" Floyd asked innocently.

"Awe inspiring," Tom said. "You people sure have a way with words. If my heart could stand it, I'd like to see Little River some day."

"And so you will, if you stay around long enough," Floyd said. "It's just on the other end of town. If you ever see any water in it, be sure and call the newspaper, and then Ripley's *Believe It or Not*."

They turned off the Lake Weleetka Road and drove through two stone and cement pillars that had once formed the gate to the C.C.C. camp, into a ghost town of scattered stone buildings, weeds and vines. There was still a worn wooden plaque on one pillar that read 'Camp Chigger Lake.'

"Camp Chigger Lake?" Tom asked suspiciously. "That doesn't sound promising." He imagined the area overrun by the bite-happy mites.

"It was just a joke among the C.C.C. boys, mostly," Floyd said amiably. "That's what folks have been calling Lake Weleetka ever since I can remember. It's no problem up at this end of the lake at all, we're on high ground. Got to admit sometimes in the summer it can get a little gnatty down at the other end, especially around the old Baptist Youth Camp. Luckily those were Hard Shell Baptists."

They got out of the car and looked at the weeds pushing their way back into power. "Doesn't take long for Mother Nature to start reclaiming her own, does it?" Floyd said quietly. "It doesn't look like

much now, of course, but those stone buildings will be here long after you and I head into the sunset. We built them to last. See that chimney on the big building on the right? That was all that was left of an old Civil War house that used to be owned by the Garland family. We tried to tear it down, couldn't, so we just built around it."

"I didn't know the Civil War got out this far," Tom said.

"Out here it was a little war, but bloodier than hell, so I've been told. All this here," Floyd waved his arm in a sweeping motion, "is the Creek Nation, and the Creeks took it right in the keester, you'll excuse my French, in the war. The North came down from Kansas, the South came up from Texas, and they fought in the Garlands' back yard. At least that's what Miss Garland says."

They walked through jimson weed poking up between concrete slabs that must have been the platforms for the C.C.C. tents, Tom guessed. Not bad at all, he considered, give me three months and I'll have it looking better than Camp Gruber. Of course, he chuckled to himself, that's not setting the bar too high.

"This still looks pretty good, Floyd," Tom remarked. "You guys did a good job, looks like. So this is Camp Chigger Lake. Maybe we'll just keep that name. And if the Garland family still lives here, the Army wants me to meet the important people in town. That a good place to start?"

"You couldn't do better," Floyd said. "Miss Garland and her brother own the newspaper in town, the *Weleetka American*. Dale Garland, that's her brother, is in the Seabees overseas somewhere, so Miss Garland runs the paper by herself these days. She's real good people, Lieutenant. Come around the paper tomorrow morning, I'll introduce you. You seen enough out here?"

"Yes, thanks. Now if maybe you have time, you could show me around town."

"My pleasure," Floyd said. "Hop in. You can play the radio if you like. I just put on a new antenna."

"I was noticing that. Looks like a fishing rod."

"Imagine that," Floyd laughed. "You got to learn to make do out here, especially now. There's a war going on, you know."

They headed back into town, again crossing the little stream that Tom would cross a thousand times in the months to come. They drove up Main Street, the town's only paved road. Floyd pointed out the post

office, Hamby's department store, Owl Drugs, the newspaper office, the police station, and Clark's Cafe, a trim little white clapboard restaurant with curtains in the window and geraniums in front.

"That's not where I live," Floyd said, "but that's home base, all the same. If Mrs. Clark ever dies, I'll starve to death. Best biscuits and gravy you'll ever eat in your life and the chili's real good, too. Anywhere else we need to go, Lieutenant?"

"You've been great, Floyd. But there is one more thing. I need to find a place to live. The Army doesn't want me living at the camp, but here in town, so I can be part of the community. And after looking at this town, I'm glad. Do you know of any place I can stay, a boarding house or something?"

"Well, Mrs. Estes has a place out on the highway for travelling salesmen and such, but she can't cook worth a tinker's damn," Floyd said. "Tell you what. I own a duplex over behind the high school. I live on one side, and one of the Crabtree boys was living on the other side, but he joined the Marines last month. It's just sitting there. If you want it, you can have it, least till he comes back, which I don't think is anytime soon. It's just one big room and a kitchen, but it's got a real good bed and it's got indoor plumbing. I put that in last year, so we're ahead of the game there. Want to go have a look?"

"Heck, you've got a deal, Floyd," Tom said. "I'll take it. Don't worry about the kitchen, I probably won't be using it much as long as Mrs. Clark is alive."

They drove the three blocks to Floyd's duplex. After depositing his duffle bag next to the bed, Tom came back out to the screened-in front porch that the two units shared. Floyd had put on a denim jacket and was sitting on one of the two outside chairs, blowing into a mug of tea.

Tom sat down in the other chair and slipped a ten-dollar bill across to the big man. "Darned nice place, Floyd. I don't know what I would have done without you."

"Glad to help, Lieutenant. Help yourself to some tea. Pot's on the stove. It was whistling just a minute ago, so it's probably still hot."

"You can call me Tom."

"If it's all the same," Floyd said cheerfully, "I'd just as soon keep on using Lieutenant. This may sound a little funny, maybe, but ever since I got nailed at Chateau Thierry, I like everything real orderly and placed just so. Calling you Lieutenant seems like the proper kind of

respect. I'd probably do it even if we were cousins. Besides, it makes me feel like I'm part of the war effort." He held up the bill and smiled before he carefully placed it in his wallet. "And let me know if there is any other work you need. Except for the two days a week I work for Miss Garland, there's not much going on around here. I told you I built that camp once. Any chance I might catch on rebuilding it?"

"Floyd, you really are a godsend. Yes, I need your help, as much of it as I can get. I've got to build a camp for a thousand men, and I've only got three months to do it."

Floyd whistled. "A thousand men? Whoa, Nelly. I know we all have to do our part and everything, but I imagine Miss Garland and some of the other ladies are going to wonder how a little town like this is going to handle a thousand soldiers with a weekend pass and a dollar in their pocket."

Tom looked down at the floor for a long moment. "Well, that's a problem you folks aren't going to have to face. This isn't going to be that kind of camp. The men won't be coming into town, Floyd. You and I are going to be building an Italian prisoner of war camp."

Floyd whistled again.



When Tom stepped into the bright spring morning, Floyd was already waiting in the Pontiac. Kay Kyser's "I've Got Spurs That Jingle, Jangle, Jingle" was blaring from the radio. It was not, to put it mildly, Tom's favorite song.

"Mind if I turn it down just a notch?" Tom asked as he slid into the passenger side.

"Heck, no," Floyd laughed. "But it does beat 'Pistol Packin' Mama.' See, I told you I got that antenna working. This station comes all the way from Muskogee. The other night I was out here listening and got Del Rio, Texas. Can you imagine that?"

"The radio sounds good, Floyd. In fact everything on this car looks almost brand new. I should have mentioned it yesterday. You've got a mighty fine car here," Tom said.

Floyd started easing them down the dirt road toward town. "Actually this is Mister Garland's car. He bought it about a year ago, just before he joined the Seabees. I hear cars these days are scarcer than hen's teeth. Miss Garland said I could use it whenever I wanted if I'd take her places. She doesn't drive."

They drove up to the brick building with the big plate glass window, the Weleetka *American*. "Here you go, Lieutenant. I'll drop you off here, then I'll go park around back and meet you inside. Miss Garland usually gets in around nine, so we'll have a few minutes. I'll show you the new Linotype machine. You can go in."

"You just leave the front door open?" Tom asked.

"Well, I guess so," Floyd said, using a voice usually reserved for children who are missing the point. "Who'd want to steal a printing

press? And even if they could lift it, where would they take it? Where would they go?"

Tom thought that might be at least part of the Army's thinking in picking this little town for a prisoner of war camp. He walked in the door, got the usual tinkling bell greeting, and stopped in front of the nearly empty display case that served as a counter. He was immediately engulfed in the familiar and pleasant earthy oil and ink smell that was the hallmark of newspapers everywhere. Tom had worked on the college paper when he was in Greenville, and in fact had majored in journalism. After the war, he wanted to be a sports writer like Grantland Rice or maybe even try to break into radio like Red Barber.

Tom helped himself to a wooden chair and waited until Floyd came in the big sliding side door where they delivered the rolls of newsprint. Floyd tied a gray apron around his waist, then ducked into the only office. Minutes later he re-emerged from the office with a folded newspaper hat on his head, one of those brimless square hats that every printer can fold but nobody else. He approached Tom with a sheepish grin and pointed to his hat. "I don't really need to wear one of these today. We don't start printing until tomorrow. But Mister Garland taught me how to fold one, so I do it every time I'm here, just so I don't forget."

Soon Tom heard the sounds of classical music and smelled coffee. "Beautiful music," he said. "Now we're talking."

"Yeah, Miss Garland loves her classical music. It comes from the college radio station up in Tulsa. And man, does she know her music. She can tell you the name of every song before they get ten notes out. She'll just sing along lots of the time. Got a real good voice, too. Said she sang some opera when she went to college in Chickasha."

They heard a rustling behind them and turned to see a woman approaching.

Tom scrambled to his feet. This must be the editor. She was a handsome woman who looked strong enough to help pull a wagon out of the mud, but still feminine enough not to lead when she was dancing. What would you call her? Not fat, not even close to fat. Husky didn't sound right either, and you only used portly for old men. Chubby was for kids; so was chunky. Voluptuous sounded like Mae West, and there was none of that in this woman. Tom had heard a friend in college say that Ethel Merman was *zaftig*, and he figured that was close enough. Tom took an immediate liking to her.

Floyd said, "Miss Garland, I'd like you to meet Lieutenant Tom Gregory. He's come to Weleetka to see about opening an Army camp here."

"I know a little something about that," she said, extending her hand. "Good morning, Lieutenant. I'm Oklahoma Garland. Bet you can't guess when I was born."

"When?" Tom just looked perplexed and uncertainly offered his hand in return.

She shook it vigorously. "Oh, I'm sorry," she said cheerfully. "You aren't from around here. It's an old joke in Weleetka. I was born on November 16, 1907. That's the same day Oklahoma became a state. My dad, bless his soul, decided to commemorate the occasion by naming me Oklahoma. I guess I should thank my lucky stars I wasn't born on Thanksgiving."

"Or Columbus Day," Floyd added helpfully.

"That's an old joke, too. Come on in, Lieutenant. Floyd's made us a fresh pot of coffee, which we better drink while my coupons last. Then it's back to Postum Prison."

They went into her spartan office with its Underwood typewriter, a pedestal telephone with an extra earpiece so two people could listen at once, and a brand-new Philco table model radio. There was an American flag standing in one corner and a few modestly-framed photos on the wall behind her desk, but it was clearly a no-nonsense office in an equally no-nonsense newspaper.

"Chopin," Miss Garland said absently. "There's no better way to start a morning to my way of thinking." She put her hand on the typewriter. "This old boy belonged to my father—a 1922 Underwood upright model five. See the space bar? My father damned near thumbed it to death." She laughed. "He wasn't so much a typist as he was a two-fingered tornado. He'd get all wound up and let fly with weekly editorials full of fire and brimstone. Did it for almost forty years. He was a heck of a guy. Which reminds me, I've got an editorial of my own to write today. Something tells me you might have something to do with it. Am I right?"

Tom was taken aback, not only by her Okie frankness, but by the fact that it seemed to him that every time he turned around, someone was guessing his business. "Well, ma'am, I don't—that is, I'm not sure. The Army has sent me here to look over the old C.C.C. camp on the other side of town, but nothing—"

"Can it, will you Lieutenant? Besides being the editor, I'm also a county commissioner, and your Colonel Lawrence had us all over to Okmulgee last week to explain how everybody in Oklahoma was going to have to swallow and salute. He said the government was going to be putting prisoner of war camps all over the state, and a lot in Texas, too. Now, Lieutenant, I know it's our patriotic duty, and I guess in a funny way, the better our boys do overseas, the busier we are going to be. But when I looked at that map, it looked like we're expecting half of Germany to move to Okfuskee County—Okmulgee, Okemah, Wetumka—what did I leave out?—Henryetta, too. We all want to do our part, and we will, but you've got to know that almost every man in this town between twenty and forty is in the war somewhere, and there are a lot of raw nerves dangling out around here. Floyd, I heard they brought the Wingo boy home in a box yesterday."

"Yes, ma'am," said Floyd, who'd been hanging around the periphery and was glad to be included. "It looked like most of Dustin turned out to bring him home."

"So Lieutenant, we'll do what we have to. I'll write a star-spangled editorial, but I can guarantee you there are going to be some noses out of joint about having a bunch of Germans only two miles from the swimming pool and the power plant."

Oh, what the hell, Tom thought. Major Appleton did say to make it seem like their idea. "Well, there's a chance you could influence that a little. I have it on good authority that there's going to be one Italian prisoner of war camp in the state, and if you would write a letter to the camp commander at Gruber asking for it, I'd be happy to personally deliver it. And Miss Garland, I've already put in a request to head up that camp personally."

"I think having the Italians would be a great idea, and we could get help from Krebs," Floyd said, nodding his head slightly at Tom as a signal of his willing conspiracy.

"That would be an improvement, I guess," Oklahoma Garland said. "But why you? Your name is Gregory, isn't it?"

"Yes, ma'am, but the family name is Gregorio. I'm second generation Italian-American. My dad changed our name during the last war. And excuse me for interrupting, but what's a Krebs?"

"It's not a what, it's a where," Miss Garland said. "Believe it or not, it's a thriving Italian community just about fifty miles from here. Well,

thriving again, I should say, but I don't want to get into that right now. You might want to go down there and talk to some of the folks. They're patriotic Americans, none finer, and might like a chance to prove it. When you're down there, look up my friend Pete Patterson, I think he changed his name too. He owns the biggest restaurant in town and he'll give you the shirt off his back."

"I'll go down first thing in the morning." Tom looked back and forth from Floyd to Miss Garland. "That is, if the Army can get you to drive me again."

"Not tomorrow, I'm afraid," Miss Garland said. "Floyd and I will be too busy putting out the paper. But you are welcome to the Pontiac. We won't be needing it. And you won't get lost. Everybody knows where Krebs is. Now you need to excuse us. I've got some flag-waving editorials to write. I'll write down a list of people here in town you might want to drop in on. You can borrow my car if you want, but everybody you're going to want to talk to is between here and the post office, and that's three blocks. It's a sunny day. Maybe you should just set out on shank's mare."

Tom took the short list from her hand. "Oh, I know that one," he grinned. "My mother used to call that 'the horse with ten toes.'"

"Don't get throwed," Floyd called from the shop. "You want to stay healthy enough to go to Mrs. Clark's tonight for supper. It's Chicken Fried Steak night." Tom could actually hear him capitalize the words.

Tom passed the rest of the day talking to Elton Gaston at the drug store (who was on the list), getting an unneeded haircut and a friendly grilling from both chairs at Olsen's barber shop, even helping sack groceries at Brainard Brothers (where he made a silent vow never again to offer to carry a fifty-pound sack of flour out to a pickup). When he got to Hamby's Department Store, he found a small welcoming committee.

"Hey, Lieutenant, welcome to Weleetka," boomed H. Everett "Ham" Hamby. Tom didn't have to spend any time describing this man's physique. Fat would do nicely. Oklahoma Garland had underlined his name, so Tom saluted, then held out his hand. "Oh, you sure don't need to salute me, young fella," Hamby said loudly in a voice that suggested just the opposite. Amazing, Tom thought, how you can tell the ones who are full of shit so quickly. "It's us who should be saluting you, our fighting boys in, in, what color is that, light brown? I want you to meet our school principal, Ed Carter." He put his hand on the shoulder

of an older man with long white hair worn in a single braid. "He's also the mayor. That and five cents get you a cup of coffee, huh, Ed?"

Carter was the first Indian Tom had met who actually looked like the Indians in the movies. Tom shook the old man's outstretched hand. Was it just an accident of timing that Hamby had never offered his? "I'm pleased to meet you, Mr. Carter. I'm Lieutenant Tom Gregory. I hope to be spending some time in your beautiful town."

Shaking hands with Carter was like grabbing hold of a rock covered in leather, and just about as lively. As with most Indians Tom would meet later, Carter didn't exactly shake your hand as offer his up for you to do with as you wanted. But his black eyes danced merrily in his broad face, and Tom knew he could trust this man.

"Happy to know you, officer," Carter answered in a rumbling low register. "Good to see a young man actually coming *into* Weleetka for a change. Know anything about football?"

"A little," Tom said. "I played in college till I banged up my knee." A quizzical frown flashed across his face. "Why do you ask?"

"Aw, Frank Brainard, his family owns the grocery store? He was our football coach, as well as history and shop teacher, and in fact the last man on my staff. He just got his orders last month. He's already over in Ft. Sill, and I got spring practice coming up."

"Those boys could practice all spring and summer and still not be worth a damn," said Hamby, daubing his neck with a handkerchief. It occurred to Tom that Hamby probably would sweat in a blizzard. "What were they last year, two and six? And that's just 'cause we played Dustin twice." He turned back to Tom. "But we really could use your help, if you're going to be here that long."

About as subtle as a Mack truck, Tom thought. He looked at Carter. "If I can help out in any way, I'd be delighted. Football was my favorite sport. But I'm going to be pretty busy for awhile, I'm afraid."

"Oh, we know all about that," Hamby said loud enough to make the three women looking at bolts of cloth at the other end of the store swivel their heads in the men's direction. "You're going to reopen the old C.C.C. camp across the river and turn it into some kind of military installation. The fellas at the barber shop tell me you've rented out Breed Breedlove's apartment. I hope you're used to sleeping next to a railroad train, 'cause that's what it's going to sound like." He roared in laughter.

"Mr. Breedlove has already been extremely helpful," Tom said, trying not to grit his teeth. "In fact the Army has hired him to supervise the construction of the, uh, installation."

"Yeah, he's handy around a hammer and a shovel, isn't he, Ed?" Hamby said. "Just don't get him too close to a book, he'll faint dead away."

"I think Floyd is a mathematical genius," Carter said quietly.

"I wouldn't know about that," Hamby said, "but I heard he isn't so good at housekeeping. So unless you're handy in the kitchen, Lieutenant, you're probably going to be eating at Mrs. Clark's. And tonight's a good time to start—it's chicken fried steak night."

Tom made it to Clark's Cafe around six and to his surprise, the place was almost full. There were three booths on each side and two tables in the middle, each with a freshly-ironed white table cloth. All the booths were full, including the front one with a waving Floyd Breedlove.

"Hey, Lieutenant. I saved you a seat. See, I told you chicken fried steak night is a big one. Almost as big as catfish Sunday dinner. How'd it go today?"

"Pretty good," Tom said. "Met ten real nice people and one jerk. Good enough odds."

Floyd chuckled. "So you met Mr. Hamby. He's not so bad really. He's just been rich for so long, he forgot that just because money talks, it doesn't mean we have to listen." He looked over Tom's shoulder. "Here, I want you to meet somebody. Mrs. Clark, this is Lieutenant Tom Gregory I told you about this morning. Lieutenant, this is Mrs. Clark."

"Your legend precedes you, Lieutenant. You're just about the only thing folks have been talking about all day. Welcome. What can I get you?"

Tom didn't have to play word games trying to describe Mrs. Clark, either. It would have taken four of her to make one Hamby. She was flat-out skinny; with sinewy, ropey arms that, as she would later demonstrate to Tom, could out-arm wrestle almost every man in the county.

"Well, there's only one real choice here tonight, I understand," Tom laughed. "I'll have the chicken fried steak." Tom actually had no idea what a chicken fried steak was, and the mental images the name conjured were not altogether pleasing, but he was young, hungry and

ready for anything. Just in case, he thought he might order something to wash it down with. “And if it’s no trouble, I’d like a glass of red wine.”

A sudden hush fell over the entire café.

“No trouble at all, Lieutenant,” Mrs. Clark said cheerfully. “Just go out the front door, go straight for a hundred miles until you get to Ft. Smith, then turn right. I’ll keep your plate hot for you.”

Everybody was laughing. Tom understood he was the butt of the laughter, but didn’t know why.

“Mrs. Clark is just pulling your leg, Lieutenant,” Floyd said. “Oklahoma is a dry state—no wine, no booze, even our beer can’t stand on its own two feet, some say.”

“Floyd’s right, I was just joshing you,” the woman said. “No wine, but seeing as how it’s your first night, I’ll throw in a piece of pie. How’s that?” She patted him on the arm and walked into the kitchen.

Floyd leaned forward and whispered, “Actually when you get to Krebs tomorrow, keep your eyes open. Pete’s very special coffee comes in red and white, in the quart and half gallon. He’ll be happy to sell you a little.”

Just then a man who’d finished dinner walked up to the booth. “Evening, Floyd. You might want to tell the Lieutenant about the special coffee over at Krebs. Don’t have to go to Ft. Smith. Evening, Lieutenant. Say, is it true what I hear about you coaching the football team? That’s great news.” Without waiting for an answer, he disappeared out the front door.

This isn’t a town, Tom decided. It’s a family, and a nosy one. I’m going to like it here.



After a hearty breakfast of biscuits and gravy at Mrs. Clark’s (which, Tom decided, was just a morning version of chicken fried steak—did Oklahomans put gravy on everything?), the young lieutenant set out on a sparkling spring morning for the little town of Krebs. He fidgeted with the radio for a while, trying to find that classical station from Tulsa, but after listening to chunks of “Cow-Cow Boogie,” “Ding-Dong Daddy From Dumas” and “Deep in the Heart of Texas,” he gave up. Tin Pan Alley had discovered the Southwest, Tom decided, and America was the poorer for it. And you’d expect Gene Autry to sound that way, but Bing Crosby and Alvino Rey?

He snapped off the radio, rolled down the window, and just let the shiny-new-penny day wash over him. Tom was pleasantly surprised at how fresh and green the rolling hills of the old Creek and Choctaw Nations were. Springtime in western Pennsylvania where he grew up was the season of soot, where coal dust was the primary color. His mother’s favorite story was about a neighbor who had dressed her children in gray, put them out in the back yard to play, and an hour later couldn’t find them.

He passed the budding crab apple trees and the stubby dogwoods already in flower. Whatever preconceived ideas he had about a flat and arid landscape had evaporated. When he first got his orders, he had in fact envisioned sitting on some dry and dusty mesa, coyotes on one side and Germans in spiked helmets on the other. Funny, as hard as he tried, he simply couldn’t seem to dream up Italian prisoners of war. They kept turning into images of his grandfather and, disturbed, his mind would careen off in another direction. They’ll be real enough when the time comes, he figured. In the meantime, enjoy the solitude. You’ll wish you bottled this and saved it in just a few weeks.

He brought the Pontiac through a series of twisting switchbacks and found himself at a clanging, banging anthill of construction on the outskirts of McAlester, one of the bigger towns in the area. Tom had seen on Major Appleton's map that the Army was building a large German prisoner of war camp here, but he wondered why they had decided to set it so close to the highway. And this prison seemed to be violating everything they had told him at Camp Gruber about being unobtrusive. This looked like a prison. It looked so much like a prison, with its guard towers, klieg lights and concertina wire, he half expected to see Pat O'Brien trying to talk Jimmy Cagney down off the wall. There was no doubt what McAlester children would be seeing in their nightmares for years to come.

He decided to take a look around and was quickly shown to a temporary building with "H.Q." over the door. He entered to find an older officer going over blueprints with two men about Tom's age.

"Come in, Lieutenant, we've been expecting you," the older man said. "Did you bring your orders with you?"

"Oh, no, sir," Tom said quickly, and saluted. "I haven't been assigned here. I'm Lieutenant Tom Gregory, and I've been given the assignment to build a prisoner of war camp over in Weleetka. We're just getting started."

"Captain Thompson," the man replied flatly and gave the I-can't-be-bothered half salute Tom was finding common among superior officers. There was an inverse relationship between crispness of salute and rank, Tom had noted, and this man was clearly destined to be a colonel or more.

"Weleetka, huh? So you're going to be in charge of the Spaghetti Soldiers," the Captain went on. "You're lucky. I'm getting the killers, the real bad guys, the hard-core Nazis and S.S. I'm getting the enlisted men, maybe five thousand of them, and the officers are going up to Alva. Those guys are so ruthless, they even scare the shit out of the regular German enlisted men." He laughed unpleasantly. "Don't worry. I won't let on I know where your boys are. The men we're getting here are mostly Rommel's crack Panzer units from North Africa, and from what I hear, they think that if the Itals could have fought a lick, Rommel would have won. Maybe they're right. Hey, Baker, show the young lieutenant here the Italian salute."

One of the young men leaning over the blueprints grinned, stood and placed both hands behind his head, mocking the unmistakable surrender gesture Tom had seen in newsreels.

"Well, I expect you're going to want to have a look around," Captain Thompson said. "This baby is going to be state of the art. You can learn a lot. So tell me, Lieutenant, how did you get the job of baby-sitting the Dagos?"

"Maybe because I'm a Dago myself," Tom answered quietly.

"Hey, no offense," Thompson said. "It's just a figure of speech. Some of my best friends, et cetera, et cetera. Baker will be happy to show you around, not that you give much of a shit, I imagine. My hunch is you're not down here to see the prison. My hunch is you're down here to go to Krebs, maybe get a little home cooking?"

"Something like that," Tom said, again surprised that everybody seemed to know what he was doing before he did.

"Well, if I were you, I wouldn't mention your little visit here today. First, and again no offense, but there's a war on, and I don't exactly trust some of those folks down there. And there might be some hard feelings on the other end. This time last year a bunch of those Italians were having an extended vacation right here, courtesy of Uncle Sam. They might not want to be reminded."

"A bunch?" Tom asked.

"If you consider two thousand a bunch then, yeah, a bunch," the captain said. "Internment camp."

Just a few miles down the road from McAlester, Krebs looked to Tom pretty much like every other small Oklahoma town he had passed through. There was the stone bank on the corner, the only two-story building in town except the grain elevator. Scattered cars and pickups parked diagonally in front of glass-fronted shops with their meaningless wooden false fronts that gave off a kind of frontier town aura. It wasn't until he looked more closely that he noticed four Italian restaurants within a couple of hundred yards of each other. He hadn't seen so many green and red pennants since his grandfather had taken him to a Garibaldi Day Parade in Cleveland when he was a kid.

He pulled his car in front of the largest of the four, Papa Pete's Ristorante, where Oklahoma Garland had told him he'd find Pete Patterson, the owner. He got out of his car and just stood on the curb for a moment, breathing in the aromas of garlic and tomato sauce that he hadn't smelled since he went to Georgia almost six months ago. Although it still wasn't quite noon, he was suddenly famished.

Papa Pete's Ristorante, Tom discovered, was actually three houses tacked together with a dozen little dining rooms, some with fireplaces, some with sofas, that the owners had tried to keep looking as much like a home as possible. With a wall knocked out here, a door punched through there, the labyrinthine restaurant had a slightly unsettling effect on Tom, like those fever dreams of his childhood where he would walk from room to room in a massive house, never knowing exactly where he was going or why.

"Are you Lieutenant Gregory?" a voice behind him asked. It was a pleasant voice, but Tom had been so deep in garlic daydreams, he jumped like a startled horse.

"Oh, gosh, Lieutenant, I'm so sorry," the man said, grabbing Tom's arms with both hands, as if to keep him from falling, or darting into a thicket. "You just get back from the front? I've got to learn not to walk up on people like that. Please, sit down. Are you okay?"

Tom eased into one of the dining room chairs and looked up at the man guiding his steps. The man looked to be in his mid-thirties, lanky, with a full head of salt-and pepper hair, large brown eyes and an Abraham Lincoln face, so ugly it was good looking. He still had one hand on Tom's shoulder, patting it just a little.

"I'm fine," Tom said sheepishly, "And if anybody owes an apology, it's me. I was so lost in thought I probably wouldn't have heard you if you'd been riding in a fire truck. Are you Pete Patterson? Oklahoma Garland asked me to look you up."

"Yes sir, Miss Garland just got off the phone telling me you were on your way. That's me—Papa Pete. Well, Pete junior, actually. Big Papa's over at the farm. He doesn't get into the restaurant much anymore. And after forty years of wining and dining every farmer and coal miner from here to Henryetta, he deserves a break, I guess. So, how did you meet our Miss Oklahoma? How is my favorite newspaper woman, anyway? You Garland family? Weleetka seems an unlikely spot for an Army officer. You hungry? Come on out back, we'll have a bite to eat."

Talking all the time, he guided Tom into a pavilion covered with now-dormant grape vines. Four or five young men bustled everywhere, tending the open ovens, setting the tables, putting flowers in each tiny vase. Somewhere a record player was playing one of those songs his grandmother used to sing. Spotting Tom, one of the young men quickly removed a green bottle from one of the tables and, bottle behind his back, started inching into the kitchen.

Tom laughed. "It's okay," he said. "Half of Weleetka told me about Pete's special coffee. Is that '*Chitarra Romano*' playing?"

Pete laughed too. "You've got a good ear, Lieutenant. And a sharp eye. So you know your Italian music, eh? How's that? And you still haven't told me why you're in Weleetka. Want some garlic bread?" He waved at another man taking out huge loaves of bread with a wooden spatula.

Tom threw up his hands in mock surrender. "Are you sure we're not cousins? This is starting to sound like Sunday dinner at Grandpa Gregorio's. One question at a time, *per favore*. And yes, I'd kill for some garlic bread."

"Gregorio? Ah, Gregory. *Io capisco. Il mio nome e' Paternovo, Pietro Paternovo. Paesano!*"

"Whoa, whoa, whoa," Tom laughed again. "I'm afraid my Italian pretty much starts and stops with *per favore*. But yes, my family's name is Gregorio. My father changed it to Gregory during the last war. And my Italian heritage is actually what landed me in Weleetka."

Pete nodded in understanding. "My father did, too, cousin. Big Pete changed our name from Paternovo to Patterson just after he and my uncle came out to work in the smelting plant up at Okmulgee. His first name is Pietro, just like mine, and the other workers took to calling him Pitterpat. Drove him nuts. So when the brothers came down here to grow grapes, he changed his name. Uncle Giorgio wouldn't do it, but he stayed out on the farm, so it didn't matter. What do you mean, your Italian heritage landed you in Weleetka?"

Tom was getting used to this verbal ping pong, but thought he should finally answer a question head on. "Actually, Pete, the main reason I'm here is to get some advice. The Army has assigned me to Weleetka to set up an Italian prisoner of war camp. It's going to be the only Italian camp in Oklahoma—all the others are going to be German. I got a bum knee and can't go into combat, so they figured they'd use my Italian background to good advantage in running the camp. But Pete, I'm afraid I fooled them. My grandparents are Italian, still live in an Italian neighborhood in Cleveland. But my father, I'm a little embarrassed to say, spent most of his life trying not to be Italian. I think one of the reasons we moved to Greenville is because you had to drive all the way to Jamestown to find an Italian restaurant. So I'm just a Pennsylvania farm boy who's about to have five hundred Italian mouths to feed. And as my superior officers keep reminding me, the Geneva

Convention says I should try to feed them what they're used to, and I'm not sure I'd know how to make a meatball if you put a gun to my head. So could you give me a little help? Help me find some cooks? Maybe help me buy the right stuff for the kitchens?"

"Of course I will, cousin," Pete said. "Frankly I'm relieved to hear there's going to be a camp just for Italians. I was afraid they were going to toss them in with the Nazis. Did you see that monstrosity they're building back at McAlester? Word is that's going to be the prison camp to end all prison camps." He lowered his voice and leaned closer to Tom. "And to tell the truth, a lot of my boys won't go within miles of that place any more. Once was enough."

"The officer in charge of the camp said it might be a touchy subject with you. I didn't totally understand that, but I didn't really want to have to spend more time there than I had to."

The young man who had tried to hide the wine bottle now re-emerged from the kitchen with two steaming plates of spaghetti and meat sauce. Tom could see large chunks of garlic swimming in the sauce, and thought maybe he had never been so hungry in his life.

"Dig in, Lieutenant. That's where the Italian internment camp was last year, and quite a few of my boys got sent there, no matter what I said. They even threatened to take Big Pete. Can you imagine? He's almost seventy." Pete's voice kept rising, and took on an edge of passion. "Did they get your grandparents, too?"

"No, but to be honest I'm a little hazy about the whole thing. I remember my father yelling at the dinner table about Grandpa Gregorio marching in some Knights of Columbus parades in Cleveland protesting the treatment of Italian-Americans. Dad was just furious, said we all had to make sacrifices for the war, and if Grandpa didn't watch out he was going to get thrown in jail, and it would serve him right. He and Grandpa don't speak. It's such a sore subject it's almost ripped the family apart. Then I joined the Army and tried to forget all about it." He laughed. "How am I doing?"

"If you lived through that disgraceful time, it's not something you're likely to forget," Pete said. "We had to go marching down to the post office and prove we were Americans. If you were first generation, you had to sign up as an alien. That's a tough word, Lieutenant, especially if you're somebody like Big Pete who's spent forty years here and throws the biggest Fourth of July festival in the state. Absolutely

humiliating. And if you were here illegally, like a lot of my boys here, they just up and threw you in prison. No trial, no judge, no nothing. People like your grandpa, bless his heart, raised such a fuss, they repealed the law last October, but the damage is done. And it's really not over. Notice anything about your place setting?"

"My place setting?" He looked down at the table.

"If you were eating a steak you'd notice: no knife," Pete said. "The government won't let any of us Italian restaurants have any knives—not in the kitchen, not on the tables. We have to break the garlicup with our hands. We're Americans through and through, Lieutenant; maybe even better Americans because our families chose to be here. Come to think of it, every American is here because somebody in our family chose to be here. Well, except the Indians, and you ought to see how the folks around here shit on them. So anyway, getting back to Weleetka, damn right I'll help you. I'll go over there myself and help you set up the kitchens and let a few of the boys cook for you. Can you give my boys official papers saying they're working for the United States Army?"

"Sure," Tom said. "They even gave me an official seal. It's the least I can do. I really appreciate your help."

"Let's have a little of my special coffee to seal the deal," Pete said. "Red okay? Hey, I'm sorry for blowing my top like that. I know that ninety-nine per cent of Americans don't even know what we've been going through. You know what I think? It's one little fat guy in Washington making up all these rules; he sends the rules out in little fat bundles, they don't work, he makes up some more. And you know what else? After this war is over, I swear I'm going to Washington. I'm going to find his fat little office, walk up behind his fat little desk and stab him with a fork."



Tom got back to Weleetka after sunset, dog tired and just a little hung over from an afternoon of Pete's hospitality.

All the lights were out at the apartment, so he drove to Clark's Café, hoping to catch Floyd. Tom would be heading back to Camp Gruber the next day, and wanted Floyd to put together a crew and get started on cleaning up the camp site. He parked the car, left the key in the ignition as he'd seen Floyd do, and stepped into another torrent of aromas, this time chili and cornbread.

"Hey, Lieutenant, over here," Floyd yelled. He was sitting at one of the tables with Oklahoma Garland. She was folding a newspaper.

"Good evening, Tom," Oklahoma said. "I got a call from Pete this afternoon saying you're the best thing since olive oil, and that you can really hold your 'coffee.' He even said that he's going to come over and help you set up the kitchens. He's a good man, even if he does talk your leg off. You're off to a good start. Have you had a chance to see the paper yet?"

Tom had barely gotten seated when Dora Clark appeared out of nowhere with a large bowl of chili and a slab of cornbread the size of two Big Little Books.

"Oh, no, Mrs. Clark, I couldn't do it justice," Tom said. "I just spent all afternoon with enough spaghetti to feed half the town."

"That's all right, hon," Mrs. Clark said. "I'll just sit it down here and you can nibble on what you want. I imagine Floyd will polish off what you can't finish; right, big fella?"

"Better bring him a glass of buttermilk, too, then," Floyd said. "That and the chicken fried steak last night make you an honorary Okie, Lieutenant."

"You use that word?" Tom asked. "I was wondering about that."

Oklahoma Garland laughed. "Here's how it works, Tom. If you're an Okie, you get to say 'Okie.' If you're from New York and say it, we'll slap your sassy Yankee face. Actually, it doesn't bother us at all. That's who we are. Can we help it if God made us good-looking instead of rich?" She got serious. "So anyway, I wrote an editorial about you and the camp coming to Weleetka. You can read it later. But you know, I just want to tell you, I like to kid around a lot, but I mean every word I say in there. We're proud and honored to be selected for this war duty, Tom, and we'll do our part. I guarantee it."

"Thank you, Miss ... may I call you Oklahoma?" Tom got a pat on the arm as affirmation. "I'm going to need all the help I can get. Floyd, we need to get cracking. You should have seen the German prison camp they're building down in McAlester. It's huge and—"

"Welcome to Oklahoma, General," came an adenoidal voice to Tom's left. He looked up to see a hatchet-faced teenager seemingly talking to someone about an inch above his head. "Daddy tells me you're going to be building some super-secret military base down by the ice house and coaching the Outlaws at the same time."

Tom looked questioningly at Floyd.

"The high school football team," Floyd said.

"Move along, Skeeter," Mrs. Clark said, "Can't you see he's still having his supper? Speaking of which, you didn't pay for yours yet."

"Put it on Daddy's account," the young man said. "And add the General's bill to the tab—always want to make a good first impression on the football coach, don't we, boys?" He turned to two other teenagers—obviously twins—who nodded in agreement.

"Mighty generous of you, Mr. Rockefeller," Oklahoma said. "With the buttermilk, that comes to all of fifteen cents. And it's Lieutenant, not General. Now scoot."

"In just a sec, Miz Garland. Just want the coach to meet his star halfback and the only two other people on the team who can catch a ball. Pleased to meet you, Lieutenant Coach. I'm Richard Hamby, they call me Skeeter 'cause I'm so fast. And these are the Agee boys, Barry and Larry." The two boys smiled and nodded again. "So, are you going to coach spring practice?"

"Hello Richard, hello gentlemen," Tom said evenly. "No, I'm afraid I can't. I've got to go back to Camp Gruber tomorrow and will be back

and forth for the next few months. But I'll be pleased to help the team come fall."

"Just as well," said Skeeter. "Most of the Indian boys would rather go fishing anyway, not that all the practice in the world would help 'em. But you can count on us, Coach. See you later."

"Charming young fellow," Tom said as the boys walked noisily out the door. "Is he who I think he is?"

Oklahoma sighed. "Yes, merciful heavens, he's Ham Hamby's son. At least he had the good sense to be an only child."

Floyd leaned into the table. "If he wasn't Hamby's son, he'd be down at the Stringtown Reform School right now. I caught him stealing twice myself, and in the grocery store the Brainards stick to him like glue. Got to admit he is fast, though."

Tom looked down at an empty bowl. "Did I eat all that? Maybe I better *run* back to Camp Gruber."

He took the bus. As he had learned in Georgia, men in uniform travelled free on buses and trains, and out here the buses were often and empty. When he got on the bus for Muskogee, there were only two other passengers. Both were women with dark hair in braids. One of them was covered in a blanket and staring stonily ahead. She was being cradled by a much younger woman who was stroking her friend's hair and cooing. They were so immersed in grief, they seemed unaware that Tom had gotten on. He walked quietly down the aisle past them and took a window seat a few rows back.

All Tom had packed was a day kit with his toiletries, socks and underwear. He intended to buy some more uniforms when he got to Camp Gruber and keep at least one set in his locker at the bachelor officers' quarters, which at least for a few more months were exactly the same tents used by every soldier on base; except the officers had four men to a tent, instead of six for sergeants and eight for privates. He pulled out the copy of the Weleetka *American* that Oklahoma Garland had given him the night before and found the editorial on page two.

Under the eyebrow column heading "Voice of Oklahoma" was the editorial "America Calls, and Weleetka Answers Yes."

Tom read:

Day after day, month after month, Weleetkan mothers and wives, grandparents and children, have watched our fine brave men going to war. To stand at the train station, to wait in apprehension for the Greyhound to arrive, tears at our very soul. Our boys are being called to their destiny, and the destiny of all we hold dear is wrapped in their manly embrace.

How badly we want to go with them. How desperately we want to help.

As I walked home from church last Sunday, I counted five little flags, each with a star, hanging in my neighbors' windows. The sacrifices those little flags represent will change those homes forever. As I passed by the silent windows, my heart cried out, "Isn't there something more I can do?"

There is.

Our nation is looking directly at tiny Weleetka and asking us to do something important, something difficult, something that will test our faith and our ability to forgive.

You see, we are winning this war. After months of uncertainty, we are winning this war. At a terrible cost, our soldiers are sweeping across North Africa, bringing Rommel and his panzers to their knees and scattering the once-mighty Italian Army like chaff in the wind. As proof of our dominance, the Army commander at Camp Gruber recently told me and other Okfuskee county commissioners that as many as 100,000 German and Italian soldiers have been captured.

These prisoners are now in England, and the more we win, the more they pour in. And poor benighted and bombed-out England can barely feed itself, much less 100,000 prisoners of war. They are asking for our help, and America is saying yes.

So all over America, our Army is building prisoner of war camps, including a great many right here in the Sooner State. And America is asking Weleetka to share the load. We are being asked to house Italian prisoners of war at the old

Civilian Conservation Corps camp across the river. We are fortunate to have Army Lieutenant Tom Gregory to lead this effort.

And it will be an effort. This may seem to go against the grain at first, giving comfort to our enemy while our men are still fighting and dying overseas. But the Geneva Convention demands that we house and feed our prisoners the same as we do our own troops. And even if there were no Geneva Convention, we will treat those prisoners with the same dignity and respect we hope our own men will receive if they should fall into enemy hands. We will do that because that is what Americans do.

In only a few weeks or months, our country will ask our little town to play host to hundreds of Italian prisoners of war. This task may seem distasteful to some of us; it may seem confusing and contradictory to our children. But our nation is asking us to do this, and Weleetka, as always, will answer yes. America expects no less.

-Oklahoma Garland

Tom let the paper fall lightly to his lap as he looked out the window at the newly-plowed cornfields—neat, predicable row after row of beginnings and hope. It all put him in a kind of mesmerized state. Even when they pulled into the bus station in Okmulgee, he sat staring blankly into space, unaware of his surroundings.

"Pardon me, Lieutenant, is that seat taken?"

Tom looked up to see an Army Nurse Corps officer. She was the first woman in uniform he had ever seen, and as usual around women, he bobbled the opportunity.

He tried to rise, but his long legs betrayed him. "Yes, ma'am. I mean no ma'am. Do you go by ma'am? You're the first female—that is, um, please sit down."

"Whoa, slow down, big fellow. I'm just a lieutenant, same as you. And I go by Connie, Connie Ballard. You go by anything other than Tall Lieutenant?" She plopped down next to him like a ten-year-old, seemingly oblivious to the usual game men and women play when they meet.

Susan Hayward with freckles, Tom decided. The auburn hair and piercing green eyes said keep your distance; the freckled nose said well, maybe not that far. Every inch of her trim figure looked starched and ironed. He thought she had the most beautiful neck he had ever seen, and then wondered if he had ever really considered a woman's neck before.

"So, it's the Long, Tall, Silent Lieutenant, huh?" She chuckled. "And the answer is no."

"No what?" Tom croaked, thinking that if you could die from embarrassment, now might be a good time.

"No, we're not going to get married. Ha! I swear, Lieutenant, if you could have seen your face. My advice is never play poker for money." She paused and laughed again. "Well, that's refreshing—the Blushing Lothario." She held out her hand. "Let's start again, okay? My name's Connie Ballard. And don't worry; if things go badly for you, I'm a nurse."

Tom laughed, too. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to stare. Tom, Tom Gregory. And believe it or not, I'm an officer and a gentleman. Even got the papers at Camp Gruber to prove it. Forgive me. I had been reading this newspaper editorial and was lost in thought. It's a bad habit of mine."

"Lost in lust, it looked like." She smiled playfully. "But of course, I forgive you. Sort of flattering, actually. You on your way overseas?"

Tom reddened again. "No, actually my assignment is right here. Well, a little town called Weleetka, not far from here. You probably never heard of it."

Lieutenant Ballard's eyes had become serious. She gently took the newspaper from Tom's hands. "May I?" She quickly scanned the editorial. "Well, it seems you and I may be seeing a bit more of each other than I thought."

"That's great news," Tom said. "And I promise, no more staring. You headed to Camp Gruber, too?"

"Yes," she said, "but only for a few days. Believe it or not, you are one of the officers I'm supposed to look up, although of course I couldn't have known it was you."

"I don't follow you," Tom said.

"I just told you I'm a nurse, and that's true, but what I really am is a nutritionist. I'll be working with some of the prisoner of war camps around here, and I had heard there was going to be an Italian camp set up in Weleetka. Yes, I've heard of Weleetka. I was born and raised in

Oklahoma City. Join the W.A.C.s and see the world, they told me. So far I've made it about a hundred fifty miles. So anyway, I'll be dropping in on you quite often, Tom. With all the German camps and your Italian one, I'm going to have my hands full."

Tom, who had no idea what a nutritionist was, nodded his head wisely. "Good point," he said.



When Tom and Connie Ballard got to Camp Gruber, she said goodbye and made her way to the camp hospital, which had a Women's Army Corps dormitory on the second floor. Tom and maybe a dozen other fantasizing soldiers watched her rumba-walk away. He joined the others in a collective sigh, then turned and ambled the few short blocks to the administration building where Major Frank Appleton was waiting.

"Well, that was quick, Lieutenant. They run you out of town already?"

Tom smiled broadly and reached inside his dress blouse for a folded letter. "On the contrary, Major. I've got a letter here from the county commissioner and the principal of the school asking if Weleetka could talk the Army into putting Italian prisoners into their little town instead of Germans. They also requested that I be put in charge of the camp."

The owl-like-looking major was silent for a moment. He picked up the letter, scanned it and returned Tom's smile. "Damn, Gregory, home run. You've got the gift, it would seem. Permission granted. Have you found anybody to help on construction?"

"Yes, and that's even better news," Tom said. "His name is Floyd Breedlove, and he was on the original construction crew that built the C.C.C. camp in the first place. He's a real keeper—one of those handyman types that every small town seems to have. I've even rented one of the units in his duplex. Oh, and Major, I'm definitely going to need a car."

"No problems there. Right now we've got more stuff for the prison camps than personnel. Speaking of which, I snagged you two enlisted men. One's a staff sergeant, believe it or not, with ten years of service. He knows how to get things done in this man's army; a champion scrounger, so I hear. He's the real thing—Pearl Harbor, the Burma Road.

His name is Jesse Hare. I haven't met him yet, but he's from Wisconsin, too, so he's bound to be top-notch."

"Sounds great," Tom said, staring intently at the other officer. "Maybe too great. Why would you want to put a man like that in Weleetka, Oklahoma?"

"His fighting days are over, Gregory. According to his file, the Japs overran his position on the Burma Road, killed most of his platoon, and the only way he made it back was to walk a hundred miles alone through the jungle to Rangoon, dodging Japs and snakes and Lord-knows what. Took him almost a month. I think his nerves may be a little worse for wear."

They stood and started walking to the mess hall next door where Staff Sergeant Hare was waiting.

"What about the other guy?" Tom asked.

"Well, there's a war on. He doesn't look as good on paper, but you never know. Name's Lipton, Private Murray Lipton. A little high strung, they tell me. He was in the base commander's typing pool until Tuesday, when they kicked him out. Apparently the executive officer chewed him out for something, and he threw a tantrum and threw his papers in the X.O.'s face. They were going to give him an article fifteen and bust him to buck private, but I convinced them to send him to you. Like I said, high strung, but hell—he's a college grad, he can type and drive a car."

"What university?"

Appleton pretended to be reading the file for the first time. "Let's see ... Manhattan School of Music. Piano and organ, it says here."

"Wonderful," Tom said. "He should blend right in. You remember the Weleetka Mighty Wurlitzer, of course."

They walked into the nearly deserted mess to find a wiry soldier still in his field jacket, chain-smoking and drinking coffee. As they approached, he jumped to his feet and snapped off a quick salute that fairly yelled "savvy veteran." Remembering the McAlester captain's flippant salute, Tom started thinking that maybe he should write a book about them. They're like smoke signals if you know how to read them.

"Please sit down, soldier," Major Appleton said. "You looked mighty comfy right there. Are you Sergeant Hare?"

"Yes sir, Staff Sergeant Jesse N. Hare," the man said. "Freezing to death, but at your service. You Major Appleton?"

"I am," Appleton said in a friendly tone, "and this is Lieutenant Tom Gregory. He's going to be your commanding officer for the next few months. You actually do look cold, Sergeant. I thought an old Wisconsin boy like you would find this balmy."

"I got here by way of Burma and the Philippines, Major. Talk about your balmy. It's balmy times ten over there. You ever been to the Pacific?"

"This is about as exotic as it gets for me, I'm afraid. Gregory, too. Was it tough in Burma?"

The small man looked deeply into his coffee mug, then slowly raised a bony finger. "Would you believe I weighed two hundred pounds this time last year? Sweated it all off," he said quietly. Hare looked at the two stupefied officers and laughed heartily. "Just joking, but yeah, it was like a Turkish bath out there, so damned hot and humid the first bead of sweat you got in the morning you took to sleep with you that night. And a couple of buckets more for good measure. But I don't know, weather's a habit, I guess. At first you're sure you won't be able to stand it, then you don't seem to notice it so much, then it just seems natural. Two weeks ago, I was still in Honolulu. My blood's so thin, this feels like Lapland to me." He pulled a pack of cigarettes from his jacket pocket. "Speaking of habits, you gentlemen mind if I smoke?"

Appleton idly reached across the mess table to take a look at the Sergeant's cigarettes. "You like Lucky Strike Greens, Sergeant Hare? Brother, do I have good news for you."

"They smoke about as good as any, I guess. They gave me a couple of cartons to take with me when I left the hospital in Honolulu." Sergeant Hare seemed confused. "But I don't get it, what good news?"

"Sorry, Sergeant, you couldn't know," Appleton said. "Believe it or not, you may be one of last people on earth to ever see these. You and our prisoners of war."

Seeing Sergeant Hare's still-puzzled expression, Tom waded in. "Here's what apparently happened, Sergeant. While you were out there on the Burma Road, Lucky Strike couldn't get green ink for their packages, so they changed to red and white. We haven't seen a pack of Lucky Strike Greens in stores in America in six months."

"I still don't get it," Hare said. "Since when did we start calling them Lucky Strike Green? They're just Lucky Strikes to me. And if

they're so rare, why were they passing them out like candy bars in Honolulu last month?"

"You can go ahead and light up, Sergeant," Appleton said softly, handing back the pack of cigarettes. "What happened was Lucky Strikes did an enormous radio ad campaign called 'Lucky Strike Green Has Gone to War.' Remember last Christmas, Tom? You couldn't turn on the radio without hearing it. But it worked too well. The tobacco people thought they were going to be able to phase the last of the green packs out, I guess, but it became a matter of being behind the war effort not to smoke them at all. Wind up was, they couldn't give them away. So the Army bought them for five cents on the dollar to give to wounded soldiers like you. Even that didn't work stateside; no soldier would be caught dead with Greens. So the Army got stuck with them too."

He picked up the pack and turned it over in thought. "But not for long. That's where we come in, and why you may be in luck. Poor old Lieutenant Gregory here nursemaided about a million packs of these babies across country and now they are right here at Camp Gruber, waiting for some special visitors. Gregory and I, and a few others, have been assigned to set up German and Italian prisoner of war camps here in Oklahoma. And we're counting on you to help us."

"Well, I sure wouldn't mind a stateside assignment, Major. I'm a career noncom, so I'll go where my orders take me. But I'm still trying to figure out how that plays into my cigarette habit."

"Well, this marks the first time there are going to be prisoners of war in this country since the Civil War. No one knows exactly what to do, but we want to do it right—especially after some of the stories we've been seeing about how badly *our* boys are being treated. As I told Lieutenant Gregory, we're going to treat our prisoners right, set an example for the world to see. Show them how America plays fair."

"Some Kilroy up in Washington figures out that if we give cigarettes to our men at the front, the Geneva Convention requires us to give them to prisoners of war, too," Appleton continued. "So Lucky Strike Greens aren't going to war so much as going to prison. When the prisoners of war start pouring in here in a few weeks, they're going to be the only people in America smoking Greens. And seeing as how your new assignment will be to help Lieutenant Gregory set up an Italian prisoner of war camp down the road, you're going to get to smoke them too, free, courtesy of a grateful nation and the Geneva Convention."

"Damn," Hare said. "See what happens? Get lost in the jungle, get chased by elephants, get shot at by Japs and have one of your favorite cigarettes sent to prison. But let me get this straight. We have to give cigarettes to the prisoners of war?"

"That's not the half of it," Tom said. "When you see everything we have to give them—three squares, two hots, a cot, movies, books, musical instruments—you may think you're going to work at a country club, not a prison. We may have a hard time getting them to go back home when the war is over." He paused. "You were chased by elephants?"

Over the next few weeks Tom and Sergeant Hare made repeated trips between Camp Gruber and the new camp site in Weleetka. Tom had been issued a two-and-a-half ton Dodge truck—what the Army called a deuce-and-a-half—which they would fill with building material and take to the waiting Floyd and his workers. True to his reputation, Hare had found Tom an almost-new gray 1940 Ford Coupe with a rumble seat and a radio. "They wanted to paint it khaki and stencil a star on the door," Hare said, "but when I saw they were going to paint it with brushes, I liberated it."

The first thing Floyd had built was the tool shed, which also served as the administrative area and Tom's office. Sawhorse tables were covered with blueprints and ash trays. Cardboard boxes were quickly filling with the endless bills of lading, inventory control sheets, estimates and orders; and aside from pushing the boxes around with his boot, Floyd had no idea what to do with them. On their third trip down, Tom and Jesse Hare brought Private Murray Lipton. Floyd had been looking forward to meeting the young private, because Tom had told him that Lipton was reputed to be a whiz at office work, a capable soldier if you didn't put him under too much pressure. "We do the best we can with what we got," Tom told Floyd. "Apparently this Lipton is a little high-strung, a concert pianist."

"I listen to classical music every week at the paper, and now I'm going to get longhair out here, too? Where's Bob Wills when you need him?" Floyd shook his head. "Guess it beats being chased by elephants," he said. Hare smiled and nodded.

Just then Private Lipton came into view. He was tall, a little taller than Tom, with large, expressive eyes and long fingers that never stopped moving.

“Hey, Private Lipton, I want you to meet someone. This is Floyd Breedlove, he’s a veteran of the First World War, and he’ll be needing your help with the paperwork. We need you to set up an inventory control, files, personnel records, everything administrative. You up to it?” Tom asked.

“Of course,” Lipton said nonchalantly. “In that regard, Lieutenant, I’ve been thinking. Ever since you told me I’d be coming down here as your assistant, I’ve been reading everything I can get my hands on about the handling of prisoners of war. Oh, I’m not talking about the articles of the Geneva Convention; of course I read those. But they’re just the ‘what.’ I can’t find anything about the ‘how.’ As you said yourself, this country hasn’t had to house prisoners of war in eighty years, and even then all the prisoners spoke English. How are we going to keep track of all these prisoners, when we don’t know their names and don’t speak their language?”

Tom and Jesse Hare stared across the sawhorse table at each other, each hoping the other would speak first. Finally Tom said “Well, I guess I just assumed Major Appleton had that figured out. Did you ask him?”

“I did. The Major said that the Army probably wished I’d asked them that earlier,” Lipton said. “They’d figured all the prisoners would have serial numbers and dog tags. It turns out all the Germans do, but not the Italians. Major Appleton said, seeing as how we have the only Italian camp, maybe I’d like to give it a try. I think he was kidding, but I think I could do it. I’m pretty darn good at organizing and problem solving. Mind if I give it a go?”

“Go for broke, Lipton,” Tom said. “You work out something we can use, we’ll call it the Lipton System and I’ll get your stripe back. How does that sound?” Tom held out his hand.

“I’d rather you made me a civilian, but beggars can’t be choosers,” Lipton said. Heshook Tom’s extended hand.

Floyd took to Murray Lipton immediately. And Floyd’s calming influence settled Lipton down, like an old horse and a skittish stallion.

One morning in late April, Tom found Floyd in the tool shed, sharpening his shovels and spades.

“A worker is only as good as his tools,” Floyd said, then laughed. “When they stuck me digging trenches in France, the Army didn’t know

they were training me for a career.” He picked up the shovels and handed a pick to Tom. “Come walk with me, Lieutenant. I got to admit, I’m the best latrine digger in Okfuskee County.”

“A noble calling,” Tom said. “Is that where we’re headed? To the latrines? I just wanted to ask, how is Lipton working out for you? Is he minding his manners?”

“Well, he can be a little headstrong at times, but that’s one of the smartest young men I’ve ever met. And he treats me real nice. Like I’m his uncle or something. We’re getting along just fine. You know, it’s funny about smarts. There are lots of different kinds, I’m thinking. I got this buddy, Cletus? He can play the finest guitar I’ve ever heard, sounds just like Charlie Christian. Banjo, steel guitar, dobro. You could give him a stick and come back an hour later and he’d be playing a song on it. But he can’t read or write a lick. He’s got music smarts. And you know I can repair any engine made by the hand of man and look at a blueprint and tell you how much sheetrock you’ll need to build those barracks. I’ve got fixing smarts, I guess. But I’m not much good around a book of poetry.”

Floyd laid the shovels down and took out a ball of twine, handing one end to Tom. He nodded up the hill where Lipton was sitting under one of the big sycamores, a book in one hand and an apple in the other. “But that boy’s got every kind of smarts there is. He’s got a head on his shoulders. Know what he said to me the other day? He’d been to the library and gotten a book on Civil War forts and prisons, right? He started looking over my shoulder at the blueprints you gave me and said, ‘Just like Camp Elmira.’ I said, ‘Come again?’ and he said, ‘Looks just like the Union prisoner of war camp buildings at Elmira, New York. You’d think in eighty years, they’d at least let the prisoners have some windows.’ And he was right, Lieutenant, the blueprints must have been the same ones they used in the Civil War, sad little old orphanages with no windows, no ventilation. So we’ll be putting in windows, if it’s all the same to you.”

“Why, of course you should. Lipton thought of that?” Tom asked. Floyd took the other end of twine and started marking the parameters for the latrine. “Why are we digging new latrines? Didn’t you already have them from the old C.C.C. camp?”

“Aw, that was almost five years ago, Lieutenant. All the doo-doo has turned back to dirt by this time. Dirt to dirt.” He looked back at

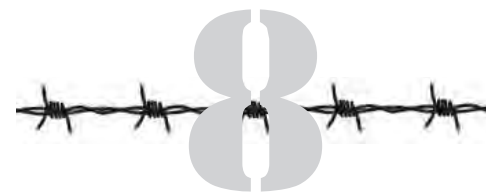
Lipton still holding his book, and raised his voice. “Dirt to dirt, right, Murray?”

“Actually, it’s dust to dust, Floyd, it’s from *The Book of Common Prayer*,” Lipton said, dropping his book in his lap. “‘Ashes to ashes; dust to dust.’ And here’s another dusty one for you: ‘Life is real; life is earnest. And the grave is not its goal. Dust thou art, and dust returnest was not spoken of the soul.’”

“See what I mean?” Floyd chuckled. “I tell you, one of these days I’m going to get that boy on *Doctor I.Q.* We’ll be up to our armpits in silver dollars and Snickers.” He shouted up at the sky like a baying dog, “I’ve got a gentleman in the balcony, Doctor!”

“You’re nuts,” Tom laughed.

“So I’ve been told,” Floyd said quietly.



Every day that Tom stayed at Camp Gruber, he found reasons to hang around the hospital, pretending to read reports, blueprints, newspapers, anything that would add credence to his Connie Ballard stakeout. He even parked his car in the hospital parking lot rather than behind the Bachelor Officers’ Quarters. Twice he actually caught a glimpse of her coming down the stairs, but she was surrounded by a coterie of other nurses both times, and Tom quickly lost his nerve. At least she saw him too, because she smiled and gave him a waist-high finger-wiggle wave. True to his past performances in high school and college, he grinned like an idiot and froze in his tracks.

Then one afternoon in early May, Tom sat on the porch of the brand-new Bachelor Officers’ Quarters at Weleetka drinking a Grapette and reading a movie magazine. The paint fumes inside were still a little pungent, but Tom was glad to have his own room at last.

“You’re Lieutenant Gregory, right?” asked a voice below the porch.

Tom recognized the gawky private immediately as the mail clerk in the administration building. He stood halfway up the porch steps, holding a small packet of letters. “Got a letter here for you. One of those nurses over at the W.A.C. dorm asked me to give it to you. Brick shithouse material, Lieutenant, if you don’t mind me waxing poetic. Smells good, too.” He handed Tom a pastel letter and disappeared inside the officers’ quarters to drop off the rest of the mail.

The letter had the same outdoorsy apples and spice fragrance he remembered Connie wearing when they met on the bus. He inhaled deeply as he read the bold, feminine handwriting on the envelope. The dark blue ink spelled out simply “Lieutenant Tom Gregory, Bachelor Officers’ Quarters, Camp Gruber.” It was only the second time he had

ever seen his name written by a woman his own age. The first time was in tenth grade when he caught Judy Ott writing “Mrs. Tom Gregory, Mrs. Judy Gregory, Tom and Judy Gregory” over and over on the cover of her three-ring binder. When Tom tried to grab it, she hit him in the forehead with the notebook, drawing blood. This felt much better.

Carefully he removed the letter, written in the same firm hand:

Dear Lieutenant Bashful, or is it Sleepy? Dopey?

A girl could get wrinkles, lose her teeth and dry up and blow away before you get up the nerve to ask her for a date. All the other nurses tell me you lean up against your car in the hospital parking lot (a Ford Coupe—congratulations!) day after day, staring up at the second floor and looking like your dog just died. The couple of times I’ve seen you, I could have sworn it was you who were dead, and they just hadn’t kicked any dirt over you yet.

I know that you and I have been busy in and out of camp the past few weeks, but the girls up here in the W.A.C. dorm have a pool going as to whether you’ll ask me for a date or just lean against your car until winter sets in.

So to save your reputation, and at the risk of besmirching my own, I’d like to ask you to be my guest for a movie and a cheeseburger Friday night. They’re showing *They Died With Their Boots On* at the Ritz in town, so what do you say? Pick me up at seven in front of the hospital? Dress code is mufti. You provide the Ford.

Connie.

He read the letter three or four times, folded it neatly back into the envelope and walked over to the administration building. He found Sergeant Hare, smoking a cigarette and going over a bill of lading for the prison camp.

“Hey, Sergeant Hare. If you got an invitation that said the dress code was mufti, what would you wear?”

“That dynamite Hawaiian shirt with the palm trees I got in Honolulu last year,” Hare said, then noticed the puzzlement in Tom’s eyes. “Mufti just means civilian clothes, Lieutenant. You going into town?”

“Thought I might if you could spare me this trip,” Tom said. “I’ve only been to Muskogee a couple of times since I got here.”

“Floyd and I will try to struggle along somehow. There’s a great beer joint over by the railroad tracks, if that’s interesting to you. They got Bob Wills and Spade Cooley on the jukebox, and if you go round in back, they’ll sell you some homebrew they call Chock. Not bad at all.”

“At the risk of sounding like Andy Hardy ... oh, to hell with it, Hare. I’m not trying to get drunk. I’m trying to get to first base. Maybe hit a double.” He grinned. “See you Monday.”

Tom sat in the front seat of his car, pondering his fate.

He was wearing the usual college-boy date night outfit of wide collar Arrow shirt, short four-in-hand tie and chinos. He would look pretty much like every other young man in America on his way to the movies, which suited him just fine. He had much bigger decisions to plumb than his attire. Should he park in front of the hospital and wait until she came out? What if she didn’t see him? Honk? No, you can’t honk in front of a hospital. Besides, his mother would drive all the way from Pennsylvania just to spank him if he did. No, he had to go in. But did he wait at the hospital information desk, or go up to the W.A.C. dorm on the second floor? What if men weren’t allowed on the second floor? He wasn’t in uniform, so did he ask for Lieutenant Ballard, or Connie Ballard? Was it too late to send a message saying that he had contracted a rare tropical disease and was confined to quarters?

While he was deep in thought weighing these decisions, he heard a cheerful voice from the passenger side of the car.

“Good evening, Soldier Boy. Mind giving a poor girl a lift into town?” Without waiting for an answer, Connie Ballard opened the door and slid in beside him. “You clean up real good, Lieutenant Bashful. Smell good, too. What is that?”

Connie was wearing a starched blue shirtwaist dress with a wide white belt. Her rust-brown hair caught the late afternoon sunlight and held it there. Tom, who spent a lot of time trying to find just the right word to describe everyone, had stopped thinking in words the minute

she entered the car. It was all images, textures, fragrances now. He even felt a soft breeze on his neck, something he wasn't sure he'd ever been aware of before. And in that tactile and fragrant moment, he felt something else, a defining truth. He was completely at ease around this woman.

"Good evening yourself, Nurse. That's bay rum, straight from the P.X. barber shop. You sure look beautiful." This was the first time Tom had actually used this word when facing the object. Tomorrow the world, he thought.

The ride into Muskogee from camp took about twenty minutes if you drove slower than most men could walk, which was precisely the pace Tom set. He turned on the radio and was relieved to find a down tempo piece by the Benny Goodman Quartet. Connie was an avid and active listener, and he soon discovered his newfound confidence working like a truth serum. He told her about the big bands and jazz combos in the hotels on Lake Erie where he worked every summer. She told Tom of her love of jazz, as well.

"One of these days if you ever get to Oklahoma City, I'd love to take you to some of our jazz spots," Connie said. "The best ones are down on Second Street, what the colored folks call the Double Deuce. Every great black musician plays there at one time or another: Lester Young, Buster Smith, Count Basie, all of them. When we were in high school, everybody's parents told us the Deuce was off limits, which of course made it irresistible. We used to sneak down on Sunday afternoons to listen to the Blue Devils—that was the big band down on the Deuce. Ever heard of them?"

"No, but I sure heard of Lester Young. They call him Pres, right?" Tom said. "And everybody's heard of Count Basie. I'd love to go with you. I play a little saxophone myself. Nothing fancy, but two summers ago I actually played third sax in one of those hotel bands I was telling you about."

Neither one of them seemed to realize that they had stopped moving and were now parked in front of Carnation's, across from the theater.

"Third sax? I don't know the term," Connie said. "What does third sax mean? It sounds dirty."

Tom laughed. "It's a big band term meaning 'You're not very good, play low, don't squeak and stand up when the other sax players do.' But

I got ten dollars a week and a white sports coat. What more could a college man want?"

"Hog heaven, all right," Connie said, then looked out the back window. "Well, it looks like we talked ourselves halfway through the seven o'clock. I hate to come in the middle. What do you say we grab something to eat here at Carnation's and shoot for the nine o'clock?"

"Sounds fine with me," Tom said. "I already know how it comes out anyway, if it's the same Custer I'm thinking about."

Carnation's was actually a dairy and ice cream plant with a restaurant tacked on the front. The well-lighted booths lined up along the plate glass windows were spotlessly clean and the perfect locale for an early-stage date.

And dates in mid-century Muskogee, and western Pennsylvania for that matter, definitely had stages, adhering to a hierarchy of rules that were as rigidly enforced as they were self-imposed. There were threshold dates, like the second date for a good-night kiss, and the fourth date for French kissing. Tom had seen in recent movies and magazines that the war was greatly telescoping the timing for this mating dance, but he knew he wasn't going overseas, and he assumed Connie knew it too by this time. Besides, the woman sitting across from him didn't look the type to fall for one of those "for all we know" lines.

"Now, let's not talk our way through the late show, too. I heard the movie's not all that great, but I just love Olivia de Havilland. We have the same color hair. Besides, if you're an Indian, you want to go see the movie over and over again, just to make sure Custer stays dead," Connie joked.

"I'm sorry to inform you that Miss de Havilland's hair in this movie is black and white. Say, back up, did I hear you right? Did you say 'if you're an Indian'? Are *you* Indian?"

"Never seen an auburn-haired Indian? Think of it as roan, that's what my daddy says I am. Yep, I'm Indian. My mother was full-blood Chickasaw."

"Was?"

"Yes, she passed away. If we're going to play Twenty Questions, shouldn't you have started with animal, vegetable or mineral?" Her voice was still pleasant, but a degree cooler. Tom felt he may have entered uncharted waters. He ordered burgers and Cokes and took her hands in his, an unprecedented event in the Tom Gregory Story.

"I'm sorry, Connie. It's just that ever since I came to Oklahoma, it seems like half the people I meet are Indian. It's enough to make me feel like an outcast. I'm Italian. Does that count?"

Connie fingered a small silver cross she wore around her neck, the only piece of jewelry Tom could see.

"Italian counts, Tom, counts a lot when you're wearing it," Connie said softly. "I'm sorry, too. It's just that I've gone through life explaining that Indians can come in different flavors, just like Italians. My mother died when I was only thirteen. She gave me this cross a week before she died. Not something I want to get into right now, if that's okay? I actually asked you out tonight as a celebration. I've just been named head nutritionist for all the prison camps in the Camp Gruber group."

"Congratulations, Connie. I've got to admit, though, I know what the word nutrition means, but I'm still a little foggy on what a nutritionist does."

"Not surprised, it's a relatively new field. Let me explain it by giving you an example. A hundred years ago British sailors were getting scurvy when they were out to sea for a long time. They discovered that if they gave limes to the sailors, scurvy disappeared. A lot of people made fun of that, that's why they started calling them "Limeys," but it worked. The men were getting plenty to eat, but not the right stuff. I won't bore you with all the details, but nutritionists have figured out that there are various food groups—fruits, vegetables, grains—that we need to eat to stay healthy. So here's where I come in. The government has determined that all prisoners of war must have 2,500 calories a day, but it doesn't say 2,500 calories of what. You could eat 2,500 calories of sugar cane every day and live, but your teeth would fall out."

"What about cheeseburgers and fries?"

Connie laughed, that low chuckle that Tom was starting to fall in love with. "You might be surprised. There's fresh lettuce and tomatoes, milk in the cheese, meat and grain. Of course, if that's all you ate, you'd probably die of Acute Pimpleitis. We all need balanced diets. And my job is to see that the prisoners get just that—tomatoes, peaches, corn, string beans, okra, and the kinds of bread they're used to back home."

"What's okra?"

"Don't you Italian boys know anything?" Connie said, feigning exasperation. "It's the unofficial state vegetable of Oklahoma. It's an acquired taste, I'll grant you. Anyway, my new job is to set up a bakery

and commissary to provide thousands of loaves of bread, canned fruits and vegetables, spaghetti sauce, things like that using prison labor. Something you told me on the bus last month got me thinking. Didn't you say that you had a connection with some Italian restaurant owner in Krebs to set up your kitchens and prepare your menus?"

"Uh huh, Pete Patterson. Do you know about Krebs?"

"Everybody in Oklahoma knows about Krebs," Connie said. "And here's where you come in maybe. Do you think Mister Patterson—that sure doesn't sound Italian—will help me set up the bakery and commissary? And if you're okay with it, we'll use your Italians and put the whole shebang in Weleetka. What do you think? It could mean jobs for twenty women in town as well."

"Oh, Connie, that's fabulous," Tom said. "I was just reading where we can use enlisted prisoners to work outside the camps. They get to earn extra money for candy and cigarettes and stuff, and they can do some of the farm jobs that our boys used to do before the war. Glad to hear that you're way ahead of me. Thank you."

She reached her hand across the booth. "Then it's a deal. Shake, partner. And don't think for a minute that the only reason I've chosen your camp is because you blush and you're fairly good looking. Those were reasons four and nine, I must admit. Now what do you say we go see my people kill Errol Flynn?"

They walked outside and Tom immediately saw the green Pontiac with the fishing rod antenna parked next to his Ford. As they approached, Floyd emerged from the car.

"Evening, Lieutenant, ma'am," Floyd said. "Sergeant Hare told me I'd find you here. I'm sorry to butt in like this."

"Hi, Floyd," Tom said hesitantly. "This is Connie Ballard. Connie, Floyd Breedlove. What's the matter, Floyd, some problem at the camp?"

"Ma'am," Floyd said. "I'm afraid so, Lieutenant. Mister Hamby and that snot-nosed son of his are going all over town stirring up trouble about the camp. There's going to be a town meeting at the high school tomorrow afternoon, and Miss Garland asked me to come and fetch you."

Tom explained to Connie, "She's the editor of the *Weleetka American*. Remember, I was reading it when we met." He turned back to Floyd. "You did the right thing, letting me know. It's a little late

tonight, however. Go on home. I'll take Lieutenant Ballard back to camp and set off first thing tomorrow morning."

As they drove back to Camp Gruber, Connie patted Tom on the arm. "Don't think for a minute you're getting rid of me that easily, my Italian buckaroo. I'll be coming with you. Pick me up at the hospital at seven, okay?" Without waiting for a reply, she leaned her head against his shoulder and closed her eyes.



Tom and Connie drove the twisty two-lane to Weleetka dressed in their best starched summer uniforms, hoping that a strict military bearing would help them in the town meeting that Floyd said might get a little rough and tumble.

"Have any idea what brought all this on?" Connie asked.

"Yeah, Floyd said that Mr. Hamby—he's the town blowhard, you'll meet him—and his son went down to Abilene last week and decided to visit the new German prisoner of war camp just down the road at Camp Bowie, which was finished but still empty."

Tom fiddled with the radio a bit, but could only find *Big John and Sparky* and *Buster Brown Theater*, remembered it was Saturday morning, and snapped it off again. "Apparently they were scandalized by all the stuff they saw there—a library, theater, piano and musical instruments, you name it. By the time they got back to Weleetka, they were spitting nails. And wouldn't you know it? They decided to drive out to our camp to see what we have, and the first thing they saw was one of Sergeant Hare's drivers delivering a pool table."

"I've got to admit, that doesn't sound like most prisons I've ever heard of."

"Well, let me take you over to Camp Chigger Lake before the meeting. We've got plenty of time. I'd like you to see it."

"A truly poetic name, and so evocative. You come up with that?" Connie asked. "Okay, though, I'd like to see it, and I can keep my eye out for a location for the bakery and commissary. That is, if we don't get shot as collaborators first."

They made the big curve and drove down the hill past the mostly imaginary Little River into town. Tom gave a shortened version of the

city tour he had gotten from Floyd, and then they crossed the railroad tracks and were out of town again in two minutes. Soon they were at the stone archway gates of the camp with its wooden sign carefully restored by Floyd's crew.

"Why, Tom, this is enormous," Connie exclaimed. "I don't know what I was expecting, but I sure wasn't expecting this."

"Floyd has done a darn good job, hasn't he? He had a head start some of the other camps probably didn't have. See those stone buildings over there? The headquarters, auditorium, library and the soldiers' mess hall were left over from an old C.C.C. camp they built here about ten years ago. Floyd said they were so well constructed, they couldn't tear them down, so they just left them." Tom laughed as he parked the car. "Of course, Floyd built them in the first place, so he might be bragging just a bit. But I don't think so. If anything, he tends to be a little shy about his accomplishments. He's part Indian, too, but I should let him tell you. I don't want to spoil his joke. You ready for a little walk?"

They headed up the slight incline past rows of identical barracks.

"Every P.O.W. camp is going to look pretty much the same," Tom said. "Just like you are required to give them 2,500 calories every day, I'm required to give them forty-five square feet of living space. I'd like to meet the guy that figured that one out."

"Then again, maybe not," Connie said. "He might be kind of scary."

"He's probably the same guy that wouldn't let my friend Pete Patterson have any knives in his Italian restaurant," Tom said. "Anyway, each of the barracks is exactly the same, twenty feet wide and eighty feet long, with showers and latrines in the back. There's a door in front and one on the side. Ours may have more windows than other camps—Floyd really wanted that—and I insisted they be painted white or yellow. I wasn't about to spend the duration looking at tar paper barracks like I saw at McAlester. Now *that* place looks like a prison."

"What are those?" Connie asked, pointing.

Tom hesitated. "Please don't tell Ham Hamby. Those are tennis courts. Another War Department requirement. They double as outdoor boxing rings."

"I didn't know Italians played tennis, or boxed for that matter. Is that a football field? Do Italians play football?"

They walked onto the soccer pitch and sat down on one of the benches lining the sideline.

"They play their own kind of football, and in fact they call it futbol, but it's what we call soccer," Tom said. "It's funny. We don't play it here at all, but it's just huge everywhere else in the world. My grandfather is a soccer nut, reads the scores every day in the Cleveland Italian language newspaper. He used to take me to some of the games in his neighborhood, what they call club soccer, and I have to tell you, it can get pretty exciting."

"So, Lieutenant Gregory, you *are* Italian. I was wondering how you got this assignment. Mind if I start my own version of Twenty Questions?"

"Are we talking about my brain? Vegetable. Yes, I'm Italian American. The family name is actually Gregorio. My grandfather's name is Carmine Gregorio. Still speaks English with both hands, all ten fingers and kind of sing-songy. My grandmother does, too. During World War One, before I was born, my father changed our name to Gregory. I don't know why exactly, but I suspect the family embarrassed him. This broke Grandpa Gregorio's heart, I think, and the more American my father became, the more defiantly Italian Grandpa got. There wasn't a feast day or parade he wasn't in the middle of. He was always going to Sons of Italy meetings, stuff like that, and it got him in trouble."

"What kind of trouble?" Connie asked.

Tom looked down at the ground and picked up a twig, something to keep his hands busy. "When I was just a teenager, Grandpa Gregorio marched in a big parade celebrating Mussolini's invasion of Ethiopia. A fight broke out, and Grandpa's picture was on the front page of the *Plain Dealer* and a lot of other papers, his sash flying as he's throwing a punch at somebody. That mortified my father and he has refused to speak to my grandfather from that day forward."

He tossed the twig aside. "But he knew how much I loved my grandparents, so he never said anything to me about not seeing them. In fact, I think he purposely left the back door open, so to speak, to find out how they were doing. So, for years I've been going back and forth spreading the news and honoring the Gregorio family men's code—'How is your grandmother?' 'How are things in Greenville?' I didn't mind shuttling back and forth, but sometimes it just felt like I was, I don't know...."

"Secretary of State," Connie said flatly, looking off into the middle distance. "That's what my daddy calls me."

"That's it," Tom said, "but why would your father call you that?"

"Maybe it's time I did my own honest version of Twenty Questions that I begged off of last night." She reached down and drew the silver cross out of her blouse. "I told you my mother gave me this cross a week before she died. That wasn't exactly true, and I didn't tell you how she died. As usual I was ... lying with silence. I've become a master at that."

She stood up from the bench and started talking to the scrub oaks that lined the field, avoiding eye contact. "My mother gave me the cross at my confirmation, then walked out of church, sent me home with Daddy, drank a whole bottle of whiskey in the church parking lot, walked out into the street and got run over by a Sunlight Dairy truck. I've often thought of the irony of that—getting killed by something called Sunlight. My mother was a raging alcoholic, Tom, one of those drunken Indians you hear so much about.

"You used the word mortified earlier, and that described me to a tee. We buried her in Pauls Valley, and on the way back to Oklahoma City, I begged Daddy to say that they'd separated for a while, that she wasn't dead, that she'd gone back to take care of her sister; anything but the truth. I was hysterical, and Daddy said okay, let's take it one day at a time. So all through high school I invented a mother who didn't exist, a stern but loving mother who made me toe the line because she cared so much for me. I always had more rules than the other girls—I had to do two hours of homework every night, I could only go out on Friday nights, I had to be home by ten, I couldn't wear jeans, and so forth. I even continued the make-believe with you, Tom. I told you that our parents wouldn't allow us to go down to the Double Deuce? Daddy, bless his heart, didn't have a clue because I never asked him. Years later when he finally found out I'd been making up all those rules and regulations, he started calling me the Secretary of State, responsible for everybody. Then I went to nursing school and became Undersecretary of State in charge of health, and now I'm an Army nurse and get to be Secretary of State for nutrition, responsible for what people eat. I'm a pistol, Tom. Aren't you glad you bumped into me on that bus?"

Tom gently took her hand and drew her back down next to him on the bench. "I'd say it's damned lucky we found each other," he said, "because it's clear nobody else would have us. And speaking of nutrition, I'm starved. Let's go have lunch at Mrs. Clark's. She has the most nutritious food in town, especially if you consider gravy one of the basic food groups."



They found Clark's Café nearly deserted, with just two farmer-looking men Tom didn't recognize working on some chili in a corner booth. Mrs. Clark was standing by the register, scrawny arms crossed in front of her.

"Well, look who's back," she said happily. "Kind of thought I might see you today. Hi, ma'am. Had lunch yet? I got homemade navy bean soup and corn bread."

"We're famished," Tom said. "Mrs. Clark, I'd like you to meet Miss, um, Lieutenant Connie Ballard."

Connie stuck out her hand. "Pleased to meet you, Mrs. Clark. Please, call me Connie. Tom tells me you're the best cook in Oklahoma."

Dora Clark laughed like a school girl. "Actually my husband Earl does most of the cooking. I just do the soups and pies and stuff. Besides, how would that boy know the difference? He eats everything I put in front of him, and half of what I put in front of everybody else. What are you going to have, Tom?"

"Soup sounds wonderful," Tom said, nodding at Connie. "Has Miss Garland been in here? I was hoping to see her before the town meeting this afternoon. We drove by the paper, but all the lights were off."

"Haven't seen her all day," Mrs. Clark said, "but that's not unusual for a Saturday. She's probably home doing the books. I swear, I don't know how she and Floyd put out that paper all by themselves. But I'm sure we'll see her this afternoon. Ham Hamby and that good-for-nothing Skeeter were in here for breakfast, and I know we'll see them there. That man's wound up tighter than a tick." She put soup in front of each of them.

"That's what we hear," Tom said. "And it's a shame, because the camp is almost finished and besides, Connie has a plan to put some Weleetka women to work and pump some money into this town, including Hamby's department store."

"Money's good, in moderation," Mrs. Clark laughed again. "That's something we've been trying to teach Hamby for years, but he's a slow learner. What's your plan, Lieu—Connie? Anything I can do?"

"Actually, plenty, both now and later," Connie said. "I've been given the authorization to open a bakery and commissary for all the prison camps in the area—not just here, but Alva, McAlester, Okmulgee,

Tonkawa. If we can find the right spot, and I need something pretty big, we'll open it here. We can put a lot of women to work right away, canning, baking and supervising some of the prisoners who can do the heavy labor."

Mrs. Clark's eyes widened. "I just had no idea there were going to be so many prison camps. But we could sure use the jobs. All the men are off in the war. So we're bored as well as poor. And maybe I know just the place—the old V.F.W. hall. It's one of those W.P.A. projects they built a few years back, and it sits absolutely empty almost every day. We can swing by it on our way to the school, and in fact, we better be on our way." She took off her apron and addressed the two farmers still sitting in the corner. "Hey, you two, eat up and skedaddle. I got to close up. And lunch is on me—it's my once a year star-spangled special."

They entered the cavernous V.F.W. building which was, as Dora Clark had predicted, as empty and quiet as a churchyard. "This is perfect, Tom," Connie said, her voice echoing. "There's plenty of parking for the trucks, and if it's like the V.F.W. in Oklahoma City, there's already a kitchen in the back that we can just build out. And rest rooms, too. Thank you, Dora." She turned and hugged the small woman.

"Hush, girl," Dora said. "Don't you dare make me cry. And we close the café on Mondays and Tuesdays, so I'll be happy to help out those days, if you want me. I could be your, I don't know, soup supervisor."

They walked the two blocks to the school auditorium, build in the same W.P.A. stone and cement style as the V.F.W., the football stadium, and the permanent buildings in Tom's camp. Floyd Breedlove was standing on the steps in front of the auditorium doors, a loyal sentry.

"Hi, Floyd, you got a good crowd?" Tom said brightly. "Is Oklahoma with you? I want to talk with her before this thing gets going."

"Haven't seen her yet," Floyd said. "In fact I thought maybe she was coming with you. But don't worry, she'll be here. This was kind of her idea—to flush Hamby out into the open."

They entered the large building which was basketball court, gymnasium and auditorium all in one. There was a stage on one side, set up with a podium and four folding chairs. About fifty chairs had been set up theater-style, and it looked about half full to Tom. Ham Hamby was sitting in the first row on one side, with the Brainard brothers and one of

the barbers whose name Tom had forgotten. Ham's son Skeeter, the twins Barry and Larry, and a few other boys about Skeeter's age had rowdily taken over the other side, laughing loudly at every word they said.

Ed Carter stood at the podium and waved Tom onstage.

"Where's Miss Garland?" Carter stage whispered. "I thought she'd be here by now."

"I have no idea," Tom answered. "Oh, pardon me. Ed Carter, I'd like you to meet Lieutenant Connie Ballard. Connie, this is Ed Carter. He's the principal of the school and Mayor of Weleetka."

"My pleasure, Lieutenant," Carter said, "I don't think I've ever met a woman Army officer before."

"Well," Connie said amiably, "you're my first mayor."

Floyd walked on stage and waited to be noticed. "Excuse me, Lieutenants, Mr. Carter. This just isn't like Miss Garland, not to show up. I think I'll scoot over to her house and see if I can catch her there."

"Good idea, Floyd," said Tom. "You told me she can't drive. Maybe she needs a ride."

"Maybe," Floyd said, "But seeing as how she lives over on the next block, it's probably something else. Why don't you go ahead, Mr. Carter, I'll be right back." With that he hopped off the stage and went out the big double doors.

Mr. Carter got the meeting started with the Pledge of Allegiance and national anthem, that Hamby turned into a spirited and mostly on-key solo. At the anthem's end Skeeter shouted the obligatory "Play ball!" to the jostling amusement of his teenage cohorts.

"Folks," Carter said in his deep rasp, "as your Mayor, I've been asked by a few of you, mostly County Commissioner Oklahoma Garland—who I figure will be along shortly—to have this meeting so we can air out some of the feelings, both good and bad, about this new prisoner of war camp going up out by Chigger Lake. Now I've been hearing some stuff down at the post office and over at Clem Olsen's barber shop that seems to be getting more puffed out of shape every day. Some of my teachers have been hearing the same things—I see a few of you here this afternoon—and there seems to be a lot of confusion about what may or may not be in store. Now, everybody, we are way too small a town to be going around whispering things and getting our kids all riled up. So let's talk this thing out. We got Lieutenant Gregory here, he's met darned near every one of you by now, to answer our questions.

Thanks for coming, Lieutenant. I'll kick it off myself by asking what some of the teachers have been asking me: are we going to be safe?"

Tom rose from his chair and took one step forward, but didn't go to the podium. He knew that his military bearing and a sense of confidence right now would say as much as any words he could use. He remembered his Officers' Candidate School training to put his thumb and forefinger lightly along the outer seam of his slacks and leave them there.

"Thanks, Mayor Carter, and thanks to all of you for coming today," Tom said as calmly as he could. "Mayor, the short answer to your question is: darn right you and you loved ones will be absolutely safe. Your Army is never going to do anything to put American civilians in harm's way. You and your children are exactly why we're fighting this war. But if you will allow me, I'd like to go a little farther than just the short answer.

"Actually, I've been thinking about this question for months, because it was the very same one I wanted answered myself when I got the assignment to build and command this camp. Now I'm just a Second Lieutenant who didn't even know what a chicken fried steak was until I came here," there was a ripple of tension-relieving laughter, "but you learn a lot about prisoners of war when you build their camp from scratch. That camp will be heavily protected and totally safe.

"I've told some of you that this is the first time in American history that we have housed foreign prisoners. This is true, but it sure isn't the first time that we've had prisoner of war camps. During the Civil War there were hundreds of them on both sides, tens of thousands of men in Elmira, New York, Aurora, Illinois, even Governor's Island in New York City. The real problem wasn't prisoners escaping—and not a single Confederate prisoner ever did—but keeping them alive and healthy for prisoner exchanges later. And we're going to have our hands full there. I've seen pictures of some of the German and Italian prisoners of war in England, and you wouldn't think anybody that skinny and that sickly could stay alive. Think about it. Those Italian prisoners were half starved when they surrendered in North Africa, you've seen the newsreels, and then they got put on prisoner boats to England, where they were herded like cattle for weeks on end. Now they're coming over here because England can't afford to feed and clothe them. It's true that I'm Italian-American, so maybe those pictures affected me more than some, but folks, I've seen stray dogs with more meat on them than those men."

Ham Hamby leapt to his feet and, waving his arms in his best imitation of Billy Sunday, roared, "So you and your soft-hearted friends have decided to make it up to them all at once, huh? While our boys are fighting and dying in some rain-soaked foxholes, you ought to get a load of what we're about to hand to these people, our sworn enemy. It'll make you want to puke." He reached into his coat pocket and waved a few sheets of paper above his head. "Last week my son Richard and I had the opportunity to visit the German prisoner of war camp in Camp Bowie near Abilene. Let me read you the official Army Service Forces list of things they're providing those poor, poor stray puppies: movie theater, woodwork shop, canteen building, outside beer garden—let me repeat that, *outside beer garden*—three ping pong tables, two pianos, eleven radios, three Victrolas, two billiard tables, a thousand-volume library and musical instruments for a sixteen-piece orchestra. That's probably so they'll have something to listen to while they're relaxing in their outside beer garden. Do you know what the folks in Abilene are calling that camp? 'The Fritz Ritz.'"

"Yeah," Skeeter shouted, "and now we're building the, the Wopdorf Astoria." He poked Barry in the arm, and his friend obligingly laughed uproariously.

"There's no call for that," Tom said, barely containing his anger.

"Well, there's no call for coddling prisoners and turning prisons into resorts, either," Hamby shouted back.

Connie quietly got out of her chair and walked beside Tom, putting her hand briefly on his arm.

"Hello, everybody," Connie said. "Before we start throwing things, I'd like to introduce myself. I'm Lieutenant Connie Ballard, and in case you're wondering, I was born and raised in Oklahoma City. I've not only had chicken fried steak, I even know my way around fried okra." There was another wave of defusing laughter, enough to get Ham to take his seat.

"I'm an Army nurse and nutritionist, and I'll be dividing my time between the detention camp here and the P.O.W. hospital in Okmulgee, which will be using Italian prisoners of war as maintenance personnel. I just want to remind you that these Italian soldiers are prisoners, all right, but they are not criminals. They probably got drafted into their army the same way our men got drafted into ours. And when this war is over, they're going to go home again. In the meantime, we're going to treat them right. Did you know that because of the Geneva Convention, we

are required by law to give those men 2,500 calories of food every day? And as long as I'm the head nutritionist, I guarantee you those calories are going to be nourishing, healthy and as tasty as I know how to make them. And ladies, we're going to be preparing a lot of the food for all the P.O.W.s in the whole state right here in Weleetka, creating some good paying jobs for some of you, and volunteer opportunities for others. I've already got my first volunteer here, Dora Clark. What did you call yourself, Dora? The supervisor of soup? Well, there will be plenty of other opportunities—"

Startled, Connie and the entire assemblage turned and looked as the double doors of the auditorium noisily banged open. In strode Oklahoma Garland, looking straight ahead, followed by Floyd. Her red-rimmed eyes and puffy face betrayed her calm, almost icy demeanor. The hushed crowd, which had risen to its feet when she entered, sat back down expectantly as she made her way to the podium.

She took some papers she had been clutching and spread them out on the podium, pressing the much-creased pages with her big, steady hands.

"Ed, Tom, friends and neighbors," Oklahoma said, "thanks for coming. I'm very sorry I'm late, but this has been a real roller coaster for me the past couple of days. Look, I know you can tell I've been crying, and I do have some very bad news, so please let me get right at it.

"Most of you know that my brother Dale joined the Seabees last year. That's the part of the Navy that builds airstrips and bridges and roads, a lot of times sneaking in before an invasion, building the landing strips the Army Air Corps will use later to deliver our troops. Dale's been working out of the New Hebrides, jumping from island to island in the Pacific. I couldn't be more proud of him if I tried."

She sighed deeply and absentmindedly smoothed out the papers in front of her for the umpteenth time. "For a newspaperman, Dale never has been the world's greatest letter writer, so the fact that I haven't heard from him in almost a month didn't really bother me. Then yesterday I got two letters, one from the War Department and the other from the International Red Cross. I still wasn't too worried, because I knew if Dale had been killed, they would have sent someone out from the Army, someone like you, Tom, to tell me in person.

"And Dale isn't dead," she said defiantly. She fumbled with the papers, pretending to read something she had committed to memory. "But now, after all these weeks of silence, the War Department informs

me that Dale's entire construction brigade was overwhelmed in a Japanese counter-offensive in the Solomon Islands, and that he is missing and presumed captured. Attached to the War Department letter is another letter from a Father Thomas Reilly of the International Red Cross. We had a Thomas Reilly in grade school, didn't we Ham? Anyway, Father Reilly said he met a sailor—he said sailor, not Seabee—in a Japanese prison on the island of Santo Tomas, named Garland. The War Department thinks it might be Dale.

"I've been crying and praying, hoping that Dale was alive and then, I'm ashamed to say, sometimes hoping he wasn't, to escape the torture." She turned her head. "And at least once, I hated you, Tom, and all you represent. I'm sorry. I was confused, and maybe still am a little. But it finally came to me this morning that you and your prisoners are going to be a blessing, Tom Gregory. I don't pretend to be the world's greatest Christian, but I don't need a brick to fall on my head to figure this out. Folks, those P.O.W.s are our shot at redemption, our shot at charity, our shot to help my brother."

"How are the Japs ever going to know we're being nice to these prisoners?" Skeeter asked, but all the bravado had drained from his voice.

"I'm not sure, Skeeter," Oklahoma said quietly. "But every time you do something nice, there are at least three who will know—you, the prisoner, and the Big Guy upstairs. Remember your Book of Matthew, Skeeter? Chapter twenty-five? 'Inasmuch as you have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me.' Now we've all seen those poor Italian prisoners in the newsreels, and if those scarecrows aren't 'the least of these,' I don't know who is. So let's get cracking. My brother Dale deserves it." There was a murmur of assent from the still-stunned crowd. "Lieutenant Gregory, we're behind you all the way."



In the next couple of weeks, Weleetka became a warm bed of activity—by far the highest point on the activity thermometer the little town had ever achieved. Oklahoma Garland conscripted the entire membership of the Okfuskee County Garden Club to create a lending library for the prisoners. She also dragooned a wealth of volunteer English teachers, who were as eager as they were untrained.

“But how am I going to teach ‘em English when I can’t speak a word of Italian?” asked the blond kewpie doll Mary Beth Devine, who was the ticket taker at the Royal.

“In your particular case,” said Pete Patterson, who had come to build Connie’s kitchens and was now hanging around the basement of the First Methodist Church where Mary Beth and the other young women were sorting books, “I’d lean very closely into their faces and speak slowly, making sure you stick out your lips so they can see them better. I can practically guarantee rapt attention. And that perfume you’re wearing right now might heighten the learning experience.” He smiled and spoke to the entire group. “Actually, you don’t need to worry too much about not getting through to the men. A lot of them already speak pretty good English, they watch American movies all the time, and they’re going to want to learn. Besides, you probably know more Italian than you think.” He took Mary Beth’s hands in his and looked deeply into her eyes. “Here, repeat after me. *Amoré*,” he said softly in his best Rudolph Valentino imitation.

“*Amoré*,” Mary Beth pouted back.

“*Fantastico*,” Pete said. “*Hotél*.” He pronounced it the Italian way.

“Ho-tell,” Mary Beth breathed, trying to meet him halfway by accenting the last syllable rather than the first, which was the preferred Okie pronunciation.

“Not so much *H*, my dear, and you’ve got it. Now here comes a hard one—spaghetti.”

She giggled and gently slapped his hand. “Everybody knows that one, silly. And lasagna, too. What’s my name in Italian?”

“Pretty much the same. We’d say *Maribet* because we don’t pronounce the H. And your last name would be *Divino*. Maribet Divino—beautiful name for a beautiful lady.”

They were locked in a gaze with a force field so strong birds could have perched on it when Oklahoma Garland came huffing down the basement stairs carrying an enormous box of paperback books.

“Somebody give me a hand, will you?” she said, easing the box onto one of the long tables the church used for pot luck suppers and Kiwanis Club pancake breakfasts. “The Oklahoma Press Association just sent me fifty dollars’ worth of Little Blue Books for the camp. Do you have any idea how many Little Blue Books that is? They’re a dime apiece. I can barely get into my office.”

“I’ll be happy to help,” Pete said. “Where are the rest of them? Down at the paper?” When Oklahoma nodded yes, he bolted up the steps two at a time and was out the door.

“He’s kinda cute,” Mary Beth said.

“Pete Patterson cute?” Oklahoma marveled. “I love him to death, but I think he’s got the face of a horse.”

“Well,” Mary Beth pouted again, “I think horses are kinda cute, too. And did you see his eyelashes? They stick out to *here*. Do you think he’s married?”

“No, darling, he’s free as the breeze.” Oklahoma turned back to the box of books. “Oh brother,” she muttered under her breath, “another war-time romance in the larval stage. Calling Frank Capra.”

Tom and Connie knew just where to find Floyd Breedlove. Floyd loved to fish, and he found a delighted and ready accomplice in Private Murray Lipton, who had never seen a fish outside of a market or restaurant. He had admitted to Floyd that the only other lake he had ever seen was in Central Park and the only boat he had ever been in had a swan on the front.

So Floyd and Murray became angling father and son, spending almost every late afternoon in Floyd’s rowboat on Lake Weleetka. “This is the best time,” Floyd said. “With the setting sun in front of us, it’s a

gorgeous view and the fish can’t make us out so good. We don’t throw a shadow, so they come up to have a look around and they see my plug and your worm and they say ‘You know, a little snack around sunset sounds about right,’ and the next thing they know, Mrs. Clark is dusting them with cornmeal.”

Floyd would cast his homemade lures into the middle of the lake or hard-to-reach places along the shore where the big fish—bass and catfish—were likely to be found. Private Lipton was content with the cane pole Floyd had given him, dropping his worm and sinker just a few feet away from the boat. He’d watch the bobber for the telltale signs of a nibble; then in his excitement he often pulled the fish up so fast it would break the surface at about twenty miles an hour, fly off the hook and land back in the water—or worse. At least twice the little fish flew all the way into the scrub oaks surrounding the lake. Floyd, shaking with laughter, would insist they go looking for the hapless little sunfish or crappie.

Sometimes they would just drop a line off the floating dock with the rusted and almost illegible “No Fishing” sign that everybody had ignored since that state game agent had tacked it up years ago. Floyd had built the dock out of old oil drums and wood salvaged from the C.C.C. camp and it was as big as a dance floor, which it occasionally had been in days gone by.

This is where Tom and Connie found them. Dusk was just settling in and the two fishermen were sitting in stony silence. Connie skipped across the dock, removing her shoes as she went. She sat down beside the startled and wide-eyed Lipton, who was trying to fashion a salute without dropping his precious pole. She laughed, put her hand gently on his arm and dangled her feet in the water like a little girl.

“That’s all right, Private. Let’s make a rule that there’s no rank out here at the lake. Catching anything?”

“We were,” Floyd said in mock exasperation. “I had a shark on the line until you started making all that noise. Nice shoes.”

“Thanks, liar. They’re my Nurse Jane Fuzzy-Wuzzies.” Connie patted the spot next to her. “Come on, Tom, take your shoes off and get your feet wet. Don’t worry, Floyd says he hasn’t seen a piranha in here in months. Right, Floyd?”

“Close on to a year,” Floyd answered. “Hey, Murray’s been telling me all kind of stories about New York City. Did you know there are

more people in that one town than in the entire state of Oklahoma? Murray can see the Statue of Liberty from his house. Isn't that right, Murray? That must be a mighty sight. I was supposed to have gone to New York in the last war, but they shipped me out of Newport News instead. I almost decided not to go."

"So is that what the two of you do all day," Tom asked, "swap stories and catch fish? What kind of stories does Floyd tell you?"

"Oh, wondrous stories about his people," Murray said admiringly. "About how his people climbed out of the mud on the back of a giant turtle and how this giant eagle flapped its wings to dry everything off and make land."

"Creation myth stories, huh, Floyd?" Connie remarked. "I heard you were part Indian."

"Yeah, but don't ask him which part," Tom said amiably.

"Why, Floyd Breedlove," Connie said sternly. "You using that old stale joke? What else did he tell you, Tom? That he was so happy that he could just scalp someone? Breedlove doesn't even sound particularly Indian, you old trickster. What was your mama's name?"

"Harjo," Floyd said. "Came from up around Wetumka."

"So you're Creek," Connie said.

"Wait a minute," said Tom. "Are you telling me that you can tell what tribe somebody belongs to just by the name?"

"Not always," Connie replied. "But if you meet someone named Harjo or Grayson, you can bet he's Creek."

"Don't forget McIntosh and Kanard, they're Creek, too," Floyd added. "And if his name is Tiger, he's Seminole."

Connie nodded. "That's right. My mother was a Paul, so you know she was a Chickasaw. And the Atubbies are Cherokee, and the McCurtains are all Choctaw."

"I had no idea," Tom said. "My family name is Gregorio, and my grandfather told me we came from the San Gregorio region of Umbria in Italy. So what about you, Lipton? Does Lipton come from somewhere?"

"In my case, it came from a tea bag my junior year of college. My real name is Lipschitz, Murray Lipschitz." He checked his baited hook and gently tossed it back into the water. "I'm as Jewish as they come, and proud of it actually, but when the war is over, I intend to be a concert pianist. There was no way I was going to go on the concert circuit with a name like Lipschitz."

"Jeez," Tom said, "doesn't anybody keep their name anymore? Pete Patterson told me his father changed his name, too. His real first name is Pietro. I guess this is the Americanization of everybody."

Lipton laughed. "Not necessarily, Lieutenant. I had a classmate at Manhattan, a really fine tenor. His name was George Walker. He used to fret all the time about his name. 'No way is anybody named George Walker going to sing at La Scala,' he told me. So he changed his name to Giorgio Andante. Go figure. Hey, did you see that? I got a bite."

Sure enough, the cork had disappeared momentarily below the surface. Floyd sprang to his feet at once. "Now give him a chance, son. Let him take one more nibble, then give the line a little tug. Not too hard. Okay, that should set the hook. Give it another little tug. Okay, now start bringing him in, slow and from side to side. Keep the line taut, Murray. It looks like a pretty good one."

Lipton did what he was told, urged on now by Tom and Connie, who were swept up in the moment. When Murray got the fish out of the water, Floyd scooped it into a small net that he had been wearing tied to his belt. Tom and Connie broke into applause and Murray looked like he wanted to pass around cigars.

"Whoa, he's a beauty," Floyd said, having deftly removed the barb from the fish's mouth. "That's a smallmouth bass, Murray, big enough to eat. What do you want to do, toss him back or take him to Mrs. Clark's?"

"I'd like to mount him and put him over my fireplace," Lipton said. "But I guess he isn't big enough for that. And besides, I don't have a fireplace. Can I carry him?"

"Sure, you earned it," Floyd said. "It's getting dark. We better be heading back to camp."

"Can we give you a lift?" Tom asked.

"Better not," Floyd said. "We don't want to stink up your car. And it's just a mile as the crow flies." He clapped Murray on the shoulder, a paternal gesture. "I think my partner here would enjoy the walk, so he can admire his trophy as long as he can."

When Tom and Connie pulled into the camp headquarters, Sergeant Hare was putting away some rolls of paper.

“There you are, Lieutenant,” Hare said. “I’ve been looking for you. Evening, ma’am. Major Appleton wants you to call him. Said tomorrow would be fine. Where you been?”

“Out at the lake with Floyd and Private Lipton,” Tom said. “Lipton caught a pretty good-sized fish. Did you know he’s from New York City? He can see the Statue of Liberty from his house.”

Sergeant Hare stubbed out his cigarette. “Hope he gave you directions. Maybe you can drop in on his folks. That’s what Major Appleton wanted to talk to you about. You’re on your way to the New York Port Authority day after tomorrow. Looks like your Italians have finally landed, sir.”



“You’ve got to come with me, Pete. I don’t want to beg,” Tom said, “but the Army will pay for your transportation and food, it’ll be fun, and my Italian isn’t good enough yet to babysit two hundred prisoners all the way across country. I need you, Pete. Please say yes.”

“Go ahead and beg. Don’t let me stop you,” Pete countered, then relented. “Oh, well, it’s a damn lucky thing my restaurant pretty much runs itself. Yeah, I’ll come with you. I’ve never seen New York. Think we can go to one of those Broadway shows? But I have to tell you, I’ll only go on one condition—that that cute little Mary Beth doesn’t wander off the reservation while I’m gone.”

“That’s easy enough to promise, Pete. You and I are the only single men in Weleetka, and I’ve got my eyes on other game.” He clapped his hands. “Now I’ve got to get back to camp, pack and pick up my orders. I’ll make all of your arrangements while I’m at it. Meet me tomorrow afternoon at the Muskogee train station?”

Tom informed Private Lipton of his trip and told him he’d be happy to deliver a letter to his parents if he’d give him the address. An hour later, as Tom was giving some final instructions to Sergeant Hare, Lipton appeared with a large manila envelope.

“Thanks so much, Lieutenant. I put a letter, some photographs, and a copy of Miss Garland’s newspaper in there. I’ve already written to tell them where I am, but they’re still not going to believe it. And don’t forget, Lieutenant, their name is Lipschitz; Mr. and Mrs. Julius Lipschitz. And just so you know, you really can’t see the Statue of Liberty from our house. I just made that up for Floyd’s benefit; it was the only place in New York he’d ever heard of. I wrote their address here for you.” He pointed to the front of the envelope. “It’s not even a

house—it's a co-op apartment. It's in a place called the Dakota. And here's their phone number, too. Thanks again."

"Your Statue of Liberty secret is safe with me, Lipton. Fishermen are supposed to exaggerate a little, anyway, and I can attest that you are a fisherman. I'll give your folks your best."

Poor guy, Tom thought as he drove away. Growing up in a New York City apartment building named after one of the most desolate states in the country. Must have been dreadful.

Because their train trip took them through Cleveland, Tom was able to get a twenty-four hour pass to see his grandparents. He called his parents immediately, asking if they could make the 200-mile trip from Greenville. His mother screamed in delight and said yes. But his father—as Tom had expected—said only 'We'll see,' which always meant no. Tom was glad he had taught his mother to drive and reminded himself to tell Connie that, at least once, being Secretary of State had paid off.

In Kansas City they were joined by another officer, Lieutenant Hayden, who was Tom's counterpart at the much-bigger Italian prisoner of war camp at Hereford, Texas. Hayden seemed completely unperturbed that he couldn't speak Italian, and it occurred to Tom and Pete that he hadn't given it, or much of anything else, a lot of thought.

"The lights are on, but I don't think anybody's home," Pete muttered.

"Pete, I've got the feeling he's never seen an Italian in his life," Tom said. "As the twig is bent, so grows the tree, as my mother says. Let's show him that Italians can be good people. I'm going to invite him to have dinner with us at Grandpa Gregorio's. We'll show the lieutenant just how full of life Italian families can be. We'll get him so loaded on spaghetti and red wine, he'll be singing opera and dancing the tarantella on the table.

"Nothing like special coffee to make a man amiable," Pete added.

It worked like a charm. Carmine Gregorio had reserved the back room at Anna's, a legendary restaurant in the heart of Cleveland's Little Italy. He invited some of Tom's childhood friends from the old neighborhood so he could show off his grandson, *Il Tenente*. Carmine and Pete hit it off immediately and Carmine insisted Anna take Pete through the kitchen, an event usually reserved for politicians and cardinals. Lieutenant Hayden didn't attempt the tarantella, but Tom noticed the lieutenant had a real affinity for slow dancing, especially with Mary Elizabeth Calabresi, she of the cat's-eye glasses.

"That other young lieutenant seems to be hitting it off with Mary Elizabeth," Tom's mother noted.

"I always thought there was some *amoré* between you and that Calabresi girl," Tom's grandmother said, looking into her second glass of special coffee. "But you don't even seem to notice her tonight."

"I'm desperately in love with her, Gramma," Tom said, "but I'm standing aside for Lieutenant Hayden, doing my part in the war effort." He dodged her feigned slap. "Actually, I've moved up in class, Gramma. I think I've fallen in love. She's a Chickasaw Indian W.A.C. Army nurse with freckles and red hair and the greatest chuckle you've ever heard in your life, and maybe when the war is over.... Okay, please, enough with the kisses. *Basta*, Gramma, *basta cosi!* Mom, make her stop."

When they got on the train the next morning, they were delighted to see that Mary Elizabeth Calabresi had made it to the station and had now painted herself against an obviously besotted Lieutenant Hayden.

"Mission accomplished," Pete said. "I got a feeling he's going to be the first blond member in the Texas chapter of Sons of Italy. I feel like the Lone Ranger: 'Our work is done here, Tonto.' Now on to New York."

They got off at Grand Central Station and took a taxi to their hotel. It was one that was run by the USO, just off Times Square. Tom was surprised to be presented with a small engraved envelope when he checked in. He opened it and read the note aloud so Pete could hear.

Dear Lt. Gregory,

Our son called to say you and your friend Mr. Patterson will be staying in town for a few days. My wife and I would be honored to have you as our guests for dinner and a show this evening. Please ring me at RIVERSIDE 9-2828 if you are able to join us. As taxis are difficult to find that time of day, I will have a car sent for you around five, if that is convenient. Murray has spoken most highly of you and I hope we have a chance to meet.

Sincerely, Julius Lipschitz.

"A car to pick us up?" Pete asked incredulously. "I thought you told me that Lipton lived in some flea-bag apartment house." He turned to the desk clerk. "You ever hear of a place called the Dakota?"

The desk clerk laughed. "I sure have, and—excuse me for overhearing your conversation—there may be fleas in the Dakota, but I guarantee you if there are, they own their own dogs. That is one swanky place, fellas. Welcome to New York."

The doorman at the Dakota showed the two men to the elevator and asked the operator to take them to the seventh floor.

"The doorman looks like an admiral," Pete whispered appreciatively.

"Maybe he is," Tom said. "They told us this place was swanky."

When they got off the elevator they were met by a small man with a trim moustache. He was well-dressed and wore a carnation boutonniere.

"Adolphe Menjou," Tom muttered, then at Pete's perplexed look added, "Sorry, Pete—old habit."

The man walked briskly forward and warmly took Tom's hand.

"Gentlemen, thank you so much for coming," Julius Lipschitz said with just a trace of a European accent. "My wife Rhoda and I are honored to have you in our home. Come in, please. Did you have a pleasant journey? You came by train? I made that journey once, all the way to Los Angeles. Superb food, served by charming men in white gloves." He ushered them inside. "Rhoda, may I present Lieutenant Tom Gregory and his companion Mr. Pete Patterson. Gentlemen, my wife."

Rhoda Lipschitz was as tall and elegant as Julius was trim and compact. She stood beside a concert grand piano scattered with photographs of Murray: some in concert, some in staged publicity stills, some of his childhood, including one Tom spotted of the child Murray with his young mother in a swan boat.

Behind Mrs. Lipschitz was an enormous picture window looking out onto Central Park, the Sheep Meadow in the foreground. It was a stunning vista.

Involuntarily, Pete sucked in his breath. "*Dio mio*," he marveled.

"Practicing your Italian, Mister Patterson? Actually, I have the precise sentiment, if not the same words, every evening when I come

home from work," Julius said. "Rhoda and I never tire of the view. We are extremely lucky."

Pete had regained his equilibrium and Okie sense of humor. "It's gorgeous, Mister Lipschitz. It reminds me of something my father said to me when he took me on a delivery to Southern Hills Country Club in Tulsa. 'Look, Pietro,' he said, 'This is what God could do if only he had the money.'"

Julius roared in laughter. "My father used to say just that, only it was in the gardens of the Hermitage in St. Petersburg."

"So you are an Italian Oklahoman, or is it an Oklahoma Italian?" Rhoda pleasantly asked Pete. "Either way, I think you are going to enjoy our little surprise; right, Julius?"

"Surprise?" asked Tom.

"Yes, gentlemen," Julius explained, "we may have something right down your alley. I was fortunate enough to secure us house seats at the St. James for the new musical, coincidentally called *Oklahoma!* Then we can grab a bite of supper, if you are not too tired."

Later that evening at the elegant Russian Tea Room, Julius inquired, "Well, what did you think? Did they get it right?"

Tom said, "It was one of the best nights of my life. I've been to the theater in Cleveland, but nothing like this, of course. I had no idea that 'house seats' meant smack dab in the middle. Mister Lipschitz, I can't thank you enough. I heard someone say that the show is sold out for months. How in the world did we get so lucky?"

"Call me Julius, please, Tom. Well, living at the Dakota helps. The producer lives there as well. Plus I'm an attorney for the National Broadcasting Company. We do a lot of business on Broadway. What about you, Pete? Did you enjoy it? You are the bona fide Oklahoman in this crowd."

"I loved it, too," Pete said, "especially that gal who played Ado Annie—Celeste Holm? Got to admit, though, at the very beginning I thought it was going to be a long night. When What's-His-Name, Curly, came on stage singing 'There's a bright golden haze on the medder,' they almost lost me. Oklahomans don't say *medder*, we say *meadow*."

Julius laughed easily. "Oscar was probably confusing Oklahoma with Kennebunkport. I doubt he's ever been further west than Harrisburg. I'll mention it to him. Maybe he can fix it."

"Oscar? You know Oscar Hammerstein?" Tom asked, dazed.

“We should,” Rhoda said brightly. “His wife is my bridge partner. We all live in the same building.”

Julius turned serious. “His grandfather, who was also named Oscar Hammerstein, actually helped my father and me escape from Russia during the revolution. It wasn’t a great time to be a Czarist Jew. My father played the violin in the St. Petersburg Opera. I guess that’s where Murray gets his musical talent. Have you heard him play? We think he has a great potential, but of course we’re his parents. And very proud parents, I must add.”

Maybe it was the second glass of wine, the incredibly beautiful restaurant or the fact it was now after midnight, but Tom found it easy to open up to this man.

“I haven’t had the pleasure of hearing Pri—um, Murray play yet, although I am aware he intends to be a concert pianist when the war is over. The Army is delivering two pianos to the camp, perhaps this week, so I’m sure I’ll get the opportunity, and I’ll be sure to allow him time to practice.” Tom paused. “I have a question, if it’s not too personal. Murray told me that he changed his name to Lipton to further his career. I don’t mean to pry, but I’m wondering how you feel about that. I’m only asking because my father changed his name from Gregorio to Gregory and it has driven a wedge between him and my grandfather. They haven’t spoken in years.”

Julius was quiet for a moment, collecting his thoughts. “So you are of Italian descent, as well. My wife and I wondered how you had gotten this rather exotic military assignment. Well, you’ve asked a thoughtful question, and it deserves a thoughtful answer.”

He stirred his coffee absently. “We weren’t the least surprised when Murray told us of his decision. In fact, we were rather expecting it. Lipschitz sounds better in Prussia than it does in Carnegie Hall. We Jews are always changing our names for one reason or another anyway—business reasons, professional reasons, sometimes simply because the clerk at Ellis Island had a hangover and didn’t want to be bothered with correct spelling. If I told you the number of famous Jewish entertainers who changed their names, you’d be amazed: Jolson, Fanny Brice, Jack Benny.

“We may lose our names, Tom,” Julius continued, his demeanor growing increasingly animated, “but we never lose our sense of self. We

are Jews, a proud part of the Diaspora that has roamed the world for thousands of years. We belong to each other. Mister Hammerstein senior didn’t provide passage for Papa and me because we were Russian, or because we were named Lipschitz. He did it because Papa was a Jewish musician who needed help. Help from a family that is stronger than borders or guns. This has caused us trouble down through history, of course. It’s why that bastard Hitler hates us so much. He can’t stand it that—”

Rhoda placed her hand gently on his arm. “We promised not to talk about that devil tonight, my darling.”

Julius exhaled deeply. “You’re right, dear,” he said, and turned back to Tom with his intelligent, friendly gaze. “It’s not a name, but a sense of belonging that is important. When Murray told us he was being stationed in Oklahoma, we started reading up on the state, especially its Indians.” He chuckled. “You know us Jews, always looking for the lost tribes of Moses. We read about some of the Indians, especially the Cherokees, and found great similarities between them and Jews. Cherokees, and I think other tribes, change their names at least once, sometimes more often, during their lifetime. Names don’t seem that important to them. But like the Jew, they are absolutely faithful to their tribal clan. Everybody knows his clan, and it’s the first question he asks another member of his tribe. He knows that in bad times he always has a place to be, a place to sleep, a meal to eat. He knows that no matter what he calls himself, his clan will call him family.

“Pete,” Julius said in a contemplative tone, “I gathered your father used to call you Pietro and you clearly speak Italian. So maybe Patterson is like Lipton?”

“Yes, my father changed it years ago. Mostly for business reasons,” Pete said. “Pietro Paternovo. I never thought of it in so many words before, but we kept that sense of clan, just like the Indians, and I guess the Jews. Tom’s been to our restaurant, it’s a slice of Italy in Oklahoma, red and green flags flying everywhere. Our whole town is Italian-American and we’re proud of it.”

“See, Tom,” Julius said softly. “I don’t want to jump to conclusions, but I think the important thing isn’t that someone changes his name, but why. Could it be the reason behind the rift in your family is because your grandfather senses it is his culture, not his name, which your father wants to put behind him?”

Tom rubbed the elegant tablecloth in thought. “That’s exactly right, and it confuses the heck out of me. I’ve got one foot in both camps, and don’t always feel welcome in either. I’m Italian-American, but I don’t really know what that means. I see Pete, he wears his Italian heritage as comfortably as your favorite work shirt. Me, I’m afraid to even meet our prisoners tomorrow, afraid they’ll think I’m a fraud. Nuts, huh?”

“Not at all,” Julius said. “But perhaps a little ironic. Perhaps you are about to discover the freedom of knowing where you belong—in a prisoner of war camp, where nobody belongs.”



Tom and Pete slept late the next day, then went to Little Italy for lunch. Afterwards they headed down to the Battery, where they caught a ferry for the Statue of Liberty and Ellis Island.

“I never thought I’d see this, or even want to,” Pete said, waving at the enormous main building on Ellis Island. “Big Papa came right through here in 1906, all of his clothes in a cardboard box with a rope handle. He was twenty, just him and his little brother. They were the first ones from their village. They didn’t know a soul, either on the boat or in America, and couldn’t speak more than a few words of English.” He leaned his elbows against the railing and stared intently at the cluster of buildings, time traveling. “He had the name of a man who was supposed to be their uncle in New York, but maybe he was and maybe he wasn’t. In any case, the uncle never showed up. Big Papa used to tell stories about standing in the lines of arriving immigrants and how you didn’t dare cough, or they’d think you had tuberculosis and send you to that hospital building over there, and then back to Italy.”

He pointed at another low gray building. “Everybody made it over there sooner or later. That’s where they sprayed you with D.D.T., Big Papa said, right down the back of your neck, inside your underwear, in your hair, inside the women’s dresses, everywhere. Big Papa always told these stories the same way he would have told you it rained last Friday or how to make pesto sauce, but they scared the bejesus out of me. I always thought of Ellis Island as hell; it would give me real bad nightmares. One day I told him that and he said, ‘No, *Pietro mio*, it was just the opposite. It was Heaven’s Gate.’” Pete smiled wistfully. “As he gets older, his memories get even softer and more forgiving. Not long

ago he told me, 'Someday I want to go back there, all warm in a fur-lined overcoat and have one of those little leather suitcases full of cigars and one dollar bills. I'll give cigars to the men and dollar bills to the children.' My mother poked him and said, 'And the women? What will you give the women?' 'My very best good wishes, Carina,' he said. and they both laughed. It's good that they still laugh together. He met my mother on the boat coming over, and I guess gave her his very best good wishes, because less than a year later I was born." Pete roared with laughter. "So now I've been to Ellis Island. Close enough, anyway." He pushed himself away from the railing and stood erect. "Now let's go see that place Julius told us about where they ice skate all summer."

The next morning a military shuttle took them to the berth where they were to pick up the prisoners.

"Oh my God, Pete," Tom said in amazement, "whatever you do, don't tell Hamby about the prison ship."

"Why?" said Pete. "What's up?"

"It's the Queen Mary."

As they approached the massive liner, they saw that the decks were filled with Italian prisoners shouting and waving, some even singing or playing concertinas.

"Looks like they're going on a cruise," Tom marveled.

"Leave it to the Italians," Pete said pleasantly. "This is probably the first time they've had three square meals in months. It's amazing what a little food can do."

One of the American soldiers standing guard on the dock, clearly exasperated by the antics, yelled at a group of prisoners on one of the lower decks, "Can't you shut the hell up? Don't you dumb guineas realize you are prisoners of war?"

"Greetings, G.I.," one of the prisoners shouted back in near-flawless English. "Yes, we know. But we are going to America, the land of all you can eat, and you are maybe on your way to Italy, the land of empty bellies and Nazis. Which one of us is dumb, huh? So here's your guinea. Keep the change." He shot the soldier the finger, then amid much applause, disappeared from the railing.

"If they're all going to be like that, I swear I'll go A.W.O.L.," Tom remarked. "Come on. We're due for a briefing in thirty minutes."

They made their way almost to the dock before they were stopped by a military policeman standing at the gate of a ridiculously inadequate low picket fence. On the gate was a handwritten sign reading "Military Personnel Only Beyond This Point."

"That's far enough, Lieutenant," the M.P. said. "Your friend is going to have to turn back."

"But you don't understand," Tom said with as much authority as he could call forth. "This man is my interpreter. He works for me. He's going to accompany the prisoners on the train back to Camp Gruber."

"Wrong on a number of counts, sir," the M.P. said, but in an amiable tone of voice. "Look, a few weeks ago when a German prison ship pulled in, a civilian got on the docks claiming to be a preacher. Then he reaches into his coat, pulls out a pistol and starts firing into the ship. Turns out he was a father whose son had been killed in Tripoli. Didn't hurt anybody, but it scared the brass half to death. Can you imagine what the *New York Times* could have done with that? So ever since the word is no civilians on the dock, no civilians on the trucks, no civilians on the trains. Sorry, sir."

Pete opened his hands in a gesture of surrender and smiled broadly. "I'm just trying to be helpful, soldier. I'm Italian-American, I'm not armed and this officer is going to need my help getting the prisoners back to Oklahoma. What would you say if I just hopped over this little fence?"

The M.P. gave Pete one of those stares Tom remembered getting from opposing linebackers. "I would tell you to halt, and if you continued, would reluctantly and with all due respect, bop you on the head with this nightstick."

Pete stared back for a beat, then laughed softly. "Very convincing argument, officer. Looks like you are on your own, *paesano*. See you back in Oklahoma." He shook Tom's hand and walked away.

"You're the officer from the Italian P.O.W. camp in Oklahoma, sir?" the M.P. asked as they both watched Pete's departure. "There was another officer asking about you. He's already in the staging area."

Probably Mary Elizabeth's dumb blond, Tom thought as he walked to a cluster of about a hundred officers standing in front of a long line of tables. Sitting at one of the tables was an officer shuffling through a sheaf of papers, two empty Pepsi bottles at his elbow.

“Rob Luke!” Tom shouted as he recognized the officer.

“Hi, Tom,” Rob answered enthusiastically, waving him forward. “I’ve been looking all over for you.” He stood and opened his arms wide. “Yep, it’s me, back from Army purgatory. Come have a look. I’ve just about completed the list of our prisoners.”

Tom shook the apple-cheeked lieutenant’s hand warmly. “It is so good to see a friendly face, Rob. What are you—our prisoners?” What do you mean, ‘Our prisoners?’”

Rob laughed. “Surprise. I finally talked the Adjutant General people into re-assigning me. I’m going to be your executive officer, Tom ... if you’ll have me.”

Tom pulled up a chair and sat beside Rob. “Why, of course I’ll have you, Rob. What great news.” He paused. “But you’ve got to promise me no Jack Daniel’s on the train this time. I just got this uniform back from the cleaners.”

“Cross my heart and hope to have a hangover,” Rob said.

“So what have you got there?”

“Like I said, this is the list of our prisoners. Looks like we’re going to have 237 of them this go-around. See, you can tell which ones are ours by the numbers next to the names. Here’s one—Salvatore Arnone, 8WI 24145, he’s one of ours.”

“So they do have numbers, after all. That’s going to disappoint a certain private at Chigger Lake. He’s been working on his own system for weeks.”

“Chigger Lake?” Rob asked dubiously. “Aren’t those the little gizmos that bite your ankles?”

Tom chuckled. “Yeah, they’re kind of like fleas. But don’t worry. You’ll find that Oklahomans have a habit of naming things backasswards. Wait’ll you see Big River. I can guarantee you if there are as many chiggers at Chigger Lake as there is water in Big River, we’ll be just fine.”

Rob straightened the paperwork in his hand and gave a set to Tom. “Here, I made two copies of our prisoner list. This one’s for you.”

Tom looked at the papers. “So what do these numbers mean?”

“Well, it’s a brand new system, of course, and we’ll all be getting used to it. The prisoners all got their dog tags on board ship and were told they can’t get chow without them, so they’re hanging on to them for dear life. The 8 stands for Eighth Army, which we are in; the *W* is for War Department; the *I* is for Italian; the 24 is for the new number of our

camp, the Twenty-Fourth Prisoner of War Service Unit—kind of catchy, don’t you think? And 145 is our boy Salvatore. The Brits got them all sorted out as they were coming over, so they’ll be coming off as a group, with one MP assigned to every twenty prisoners until we get them to camp. Why don’t you take the lead truck and get things set up at the troop trains? We’re in Bravo Nine, the last ten cars. I can handle all the paperwork at this end.

“Damn, Rob, I didn’t even know I had you, and now I don’t know what I ever did without you.” He smiled. “I’ll see you at the train station.”

Five of the cars were set up like regular sitting cars, with about forty prisoners and one M.P. per car. Three of the cars were set up hospital-style for those too weak or ill to sit for the three-day journey. The last two cars were eating and sleeping quarters for the Army personnel, those who were pulling the customary four-on, four-off guard duty they had learned at military police school. Although the M.P.s had been instructed on the courtesies demanded by the Geneva Convention, they were armed to the teeth, and displayed a steely, no-nonsense approach that completely extinguished the boisterous prisoner behavior seen on the Queen Mary.

As Tom and Rob walked down the aisles counting noses and numbers, Tom realized that without Pete Patterson, he was going to have to hope to find an English-speaking prisoner to serve as his go-between.

“Anybody in here speak English?” Tom asked the first car. Although his grasp of Italian was improving, it still wasn’t very good. He decided to mask this weakness and speak only English on the train. A couple of hands slowly came up. Every army is the same, Tom thought, never volunteer for anything. Rob took their names and they moved on.

In the next car, Tom and Rob were startled when a goofy-looking tall prisoner not only raised his hand, but jumped out of his seat and stood directly in front of Tom, his face no more than a foot from the lieutenant. Tom, who knew that this was the normal conversational distance for Italians, casually waved off an M.P. who had already unsnapped his pistol holster.

The Italian, who looked to have three teeth up and four down, all black with cavities, loudly announced, “Hey, you, American G.I. boy soldier. I speak good the English. You be give me one cigarette, for please?” He beamed and sat back down.

“Breathtaking,” said Rob.

“Did you say breath?” Tom asked, shaking his head as they moved to the next car. “That was a paint peeler. Remind me to double the toothpaste requisition when we get to camp.”

They arrived at the last sitting car with varying degrees of success, but nobody reached the level of competency Tom had hoped for. He decided to form his question so that it would serve as its own little test.

“Listen up, fellas,” Tom said. “I’m looking for somebody who knows the lingo forwards and backwards. I need a mouthpiece. There just might be a little something extra in it for the right guy. Does anybody here speak real true-blue American English?”

A prisoner with a toothy smile sitting near the rear of the car raised his hand. “I speak Brooklyn, does that count? Flatbush, actually. And what’s this ‘little something extra’ about?”



His name was Vito D’Amico—“A friend for life,” he loosely translated—and true to his word he had lived all of his teenage years in Brooklyn. His English was perfect, even cultured, except when he slipped into the sports and street vernacular of his youth. Then it was pure Flatbush, dripping in “dem bums” and “dose guys.” Tom thought that the man seemed to turn the accent on and off so easily it might have been as much stagecraft as habit.

D’Amico was in his mid-thirties, a little older than most of the other soldiers, and far more polished. He was gaunt with eyes that had seen too much, but his ready smile and confident nature made him more attractive than the individual parts might have promised. He seemed popular with the other men, and knew a surprising number of them by name. He was a walking dossier. “That’s Aldo Pensotti; we call him *Il Maestro* because he was a music teacher in Verona before the war. He can play a violin to make you cry, and almost every other instrument as well, brass, reed or string. He speaks a little English, learned it mostly from movies, so he sounds kind of old-fashioned some times.”

He pointed to a young man dozing a few rows further on. “That’s Angelo Festa. One of the finest young tenors I ever heard. He’s from Padua. I was going to invite him to sing in Verona before we both got sent to starve in Grumbalia. And there’s Ennio Venturini, the cook. His family owns a restaurant in Valpolicella. There’s Antonio Aranetto, the blacksmith. Tough Tony, we call him. Man, is he strong. A little weak between the ears, maybe, but a good heart. And that’s Moro Morino, he was the postmaster of my village, speaks a little English, too, and—”

“Whoa, hold it, D’Amico,” Rob said. “I can’t walk and write at the same time. Give me a break. Let’s go sit down.”

Tom, Rob and Vito made their way to the Army mess car where the off-duty M.P.s lounged. Rob started transferring his hastily-taken scribbles to more complete notes, to be added to the files when they returned to camp.

They sat at an empty table, drinking coffee. Tom stirred his cup as he watched the prisoner pour enough sugar in his own to make syrup. “Long time, no sugar, huh? Well, Mister Brooklyn, you are an absolute wealth of information. How in the world did you find out so much about your fellow prisoners in so little time?”

“You’d be surprised how time crawls when you’re a prisoner,” D’Amico said, taking a gulp and grimacing. “We’ve been almost six months in one prison camp or another. And the most popular thing to do in prison is tell your life story to anybody who will listen. ‘Here I am,’ we shout to each other, ‘this is my life. I am a man. Tell somebody you saw me.’ One of our greatest fears in prison was that we would be forgotten, thrown away, abandoned. Some of the English guards weren’t as nice as Americans, sometimes they’d yell at us, call us names, even take away our food. But do you know what? When they came into our dirty, crowded rooms, we were glad to see them. They hadn’t forgotten us. Isn’t that crazy?”

“But the other reason most of us know each other,” D’Amico continued, “is because we come from the same region—Verona, Garda, Padua, my home town of Bardolino. I was working in Verona and the bastard Army came roaring through, drafting everyone in sight. *Segundi Brigada*, most of us anyway, landed in Cape Bon Benghazi last October, marched all over every sand dune in Africa, got to Tobruk in time to see the Germans leaving, turned around and marched back to Grumbalia, almost starved to death, surrendered, and got put on prison ships to England. Most of us never fired a shot, and lucky thing, too, if you’d seen the rifles they gave us. So here we are, *Tenente, alla servizio*. Not exactly Puccini, is it?”

“Depends on which side you’re on, I guess,” Tom said. “You speak absolutely perfect English. Do you mind me asking why you left Brooklyn and went back to Italy?”

“Good question, and one that I have asked myself only three or four hundred times,” Vito said. “I seem to have a history of making right decisions at the wrong time, as well as a few wrong decisions, which don’t require much timing. Are you sure you want to hear all this?”

“Sure,” Rob said. “Time can crawl on a train, too, and we’re still a day and a half out of Oklahoma. Besides, I got to figure out if I can trust you. You’re going to be the only person standing between me and that snaggle-toothed flamethrower in the first car.”

D’Amico laughed. “So we’re going to Oklahoma, huh? We were wondering about that. We can play Cowboys and Italians. Don’t worry about the flamethrower. We call him Dracula. He’s harmless. His real name is Plutarco, if you can believe that. His mother must have had big plans for him. So anyway, you asked for it. Here’s the Vito D’Amico Story, coming soon to a prison camp near you.

“I was born in a small town in the wine country north of Verona, Bardolino, as I mentioned before. My father was a butcher, working for his father, but he was ambitious and wanted more. So when I was eight or nine—this was just before the Great War—he and his cousin scraped together some money and we all came to America. They found a little butcher shop in Brooklyn, bought into it, and did pretty darn good. Until 1918, that is. That’s when he got the influenza and died.”

He stopped and slid his hand over to a half-empty pack of Chesterfields that had been left by one of the M.P.s. “Oh, my God, American cigarettes,” he marveled. “I don’t smoke myself, but do you mind if I take a few? They’re like money in the camps.”

“Then you’re about to become very rich men,” Tom said. “Go on with your story.”

D’Amico shot Tom a puzzled look as he put a cigarette behind each ear. “Well, anyway, after that, Mama took in sewing, and with the money Dad’s cousin gave her for Dad’s half of the shop, we did all right. And just like Plutarco’s mother, Mama had big plans for me.

“When I was a kid, I had the most beautiful voice in the neighborhood. I’m not just bragging. Everybody said that. I always had solos in the Christmas cantatas at the Cathedral, and sang at all the saints’ day festivals. Mama told everybody that I was going to be a great opera star, and my parish even collected enough money so I could have private lessons. As I got older, I was lucky my voice didn’t change, it just got deeper. So the teacher started grooming me for the great baritone parts like Baron Scarpio in *Tosca*. I started to believe the dream, and opera got into my blood.

“Then when I was seventeen, my priest told me there was a chance I could win a scholarship to the Brooklyn Academy of Music. I was elated. Only one little problem—I had to audition.

"I was so arrogant. I thought I nailed the audition. But when they called me back, I could tell something was wrong. They told me I had a 'pleasant' voice, which is the kiss of death, of course. I argued with them, and said that my body and soul belonged to opera. I can still remember word for word the professor's reply: 'Young man, if you want a life in opera, it will be behind the curtains, not in front of them.' To everyone's surprise, including my own, I said, 'Can you make a living back there?' Everybody laughed, and I wound up with a job as an apprentice floor manager.

"I worked backstage at B.A.M. for three years, working my way up. Then one day I read that there was an opening for an assistant stage manager at the Arena Opera in Verona. That's one of the great opera companies in the world, I knew Verona like the back of my hand, and we still had family back there. So I applied for the job, got it, and Mama and I went back to Italy.

"Don't forget, America and Italy were hugging and kissing all over the place in those days," Vito said finally. "It never occurred to me that we'd become enemies."

"Tell me about it," Tom said. "My grandfather marched in a Sons of Italy parade in Cleveland celebrating Mussolini's invasion of Ethiopia. Were you in the army by then?"

"No, that came much later, when they drafted everybody, swept us up like leaves in autumn. Your grandfather's *paesano*? Hey, good news. How's your Italian, Lieutenant?"

"About as good as your Swedish, I imagine," Tom said. "I'm working on it, but I've got a long way to go. And I'd just as soon the other men not know that I speak any Italian, at least for the time being." He pointed a finger at Vito, warning the man not to reveal his secret. "Now I've got an assignment for you. I want you and the other prisoners to behave when we get to the camp. How they comport themselves, especially in the beginning, is going to go a long way to determine how they'll be treated down the road. By the same token, I want them to know we are not going to forget them, abandon them or abuse them. And we want to get off on the right foot with them. I want you to poll the other prisoners. What's the thing we could give them when they arrive in camp, some treat you haven't had for a while—besides sugar, that is?"

"I don't even have to ask," Vito said. "That's easy. Cigarettes. That and orange juice."

Tom asked one of the guards to return Vito to his seat. When they were alone, he turned to Rob. "When we get to the next station, wire Sergeant Hare to have plenty of orange juice and cigarettes for us when we pull in day after tomorrow. Oh, and something else. Ask him if he can get his hands on that John Wayne movie, *Stagecoach*. I know we've already got projectors and screens." Rob raised his eyebrows in a look of curiosity. "D'Amico just gave me an idea. By the time he gets back to his seat, everybody's going to know they're going to Oklahoma. I want them to know it's also called Indian Territory."

They arrived in Weleetka in a warm and steady rain. This was fine with Tom, who wanted as few onlookers at the station as possible. The M.P.s, who were in slickers and rain hats, didn't seem to be in any particular hurry. With Vito's help, they checked off every name and number, and then lined the prisoners up in fours. With Sergeant Hare in the lead, they marched the two miles along the country highway across Big River, then another mile up the gravel road to Camp Chigger Lake. The prisoners, who had clearly marched like this many times since their capture, took little notice of the rain, and trudged along with only minor prompting by the M.P.s.

Connie, all starch and perfume, was waiting for Tom at the door of the big all-purpose gymnasium-auditorium. When he got a few feet away, they both made an involuntary stutter-step which was prelude to a hug; then feeling hundreds of eyes upon them, stepped back and snapped a mutual salute. Connie's was delivered with a mischievous wink that felt as intimate as a kiss to Tom.

The auditorium had been set up theater-style with long tables along each side, laden with tin mugs of orange juice, cigarettes and matches. With absolutely no instruction, each prisoner took one mug, one pack of cigarettes and one box of matches, then obediently took his seat.

Tom introduced Rob Luke to Connie and Floyd, who was also serving as the projectionist. The four of them watched as the processional finally came to an end.

"They certainly have good manners," Connie commented. "Almost makes up for their odor. What is that, *eau de wet dog*?"

"It's their wool uniforms, or what's left of them," Rob said. "Can you imagine a country sending its soldiers to Africa in wool uniforms?"

Floyd laughed. "Actually, I can. In the last war, every one of us doughboys was sent to the trenches covered in wool. When it rained, which was every other day, we put on twenty pounds. And smell? We called it rain rot. War just smells bad, I guess. I didn't change my socks and long johns for three months."

"Well, we will get them showered and into new uniforms soon enough," Tom said. "But first, I want to make a real impression on them about where they are and why it would be futile to try to escape. Floyd, you speak Indian, don't you?"

"There's all kinds of Indian, Lieutenant," Floyd said, "but yes, I speak Creek."

"Okay, here's what I'd like to ask you to do. After the movie, I'm going to say a few words of welcome. I'm going to call on you to say something in Creek. It doesn't matter what you say; that the fish are biting at the lake, that we eat corn, that it snows in winter. But at the end, I want you to raise your voice and forcefully point to the west. Okay?"

They watched the movie with Vito D'Amico loudly providing the translation. When the movie got to the Indian attack on the stage coach the auditorium grew as quiet as a library, precisely the effect Tom had hoped for.

When the film was over, Tom strode to the front, with Floyd Breedlove in tow.

"Mr. D'Amico, will you step forward to serve as my translator? That's fine." Tom cleared his throat. "Gentlemen," Tom began, "Welcome to the Twenty-Fourth Prisoner of War Service Unit in Weleetka, Oklahoma, which will be your home for the duration of this war.

"Weleetka is in the state of Oklahoma, in what is known as Indian Territory. As my fellow officer Lieutenant Ballard—please raise your hand Lieutenant Ballard—says, we understand that you are prisoners of war, but you are not criminals. We intend to abide by all the articles of the Geneva Convention and treat you with dignity and respect. A copy of the Geneva Convention in Italian will be made available to you as soon as possible."

There was a collective murmur of approval as Vito translated.

"The Geneva Convention mentions attempted escapes and it is that subject I would like to address at this time. It is natural that any prisoner would contemplate escape. I would do the same if I were in

your position. But there are four reasons I hope for your sake you do not attempt escape. It is not just that you would have to walk two thousand miles without food and water just to get to the Atlantic Ocean, and then what would you do? Swim home? It's also not just that, in the one-in-a-million chance you did get back to Italy, it is now completely controlled by the Nazis, and they hate you far worse than we ever did. And it's not necessarily about getting lost in these woods, where cougars, bobcats and wolves rule the night, although all three of those must be considered. No, it is more ... please allow me to introduce Mister Floyd Breedlove, who is the supervisor of all civilian personnel at this camp. Mister Breedlove speaks very good English, but he is an Indian who would rather tell you about some of the real dangers to you in his own language. Mister Breedlove?"

Floyd stepped forward and began addressing the prisoners in the ancient guttural Creek language, using his hands for emphasis. As he spoke, his voice became stronger until he virtually shouted his last words, and then he pointed dramatically to the back of the building.

"I have no idea what he's talking about," Vito said, holding both hands up in defeat.

"Thank you, Mister Breedlove," Tom continued. "In the language of his heart, he wants to assure you that he and his people have been civilized for many years, and would never do you harm. In fact, because they are such great trackers and hunters, he promises that if you try to leave and get lost, as you almost surely will, he and his braves will find you and bring you back to safety, wherever you are. He also said that the wild Indians such as you just saw in the last movie are far to the west at this time, and that as long as you do not wander far in the direction he was pointing, he and his men will guarantee your safety. Now, Sergeant Hare, if you and Private Lipton will please escort the prisoners to their dormitories, they will find new clothing, a toothbrush and a bar of soap on each bunk. I expect each man to be showered before dinner. That is all, gentlemen."

The auditorium, which had been quiet as a library, had now descended several decibels further to tomb-like.

As the men filed silently out the double doors, Connie poked Tom on the arm. "You are the most egregious liar in the entire state, and we invented lies. Maybe there's hope for you yet. Welcome home, big guy."



That night the prisoners showed up for one of their rare collective dinners in the auditorium, clean and dressed in the ugliest uniforms Tom had ever seen. They were actually old Civilian Conservation Corps uniforms left over when the C.C.C. closed for good in 1942. Each prisoner had been given two identical sets of a black denim long-sleeved shirt, black denim pants, a canvas soft-brimmed hat, socks, and underwear. On the back of each shirt were the letters PW in white and on the front of the pants there was a white painted P on the right knee and a W on the left. It had taken most of the afternoon to assign the boots that came only in four sizes—small, medium, large, and Plutarco. After an entire lifetime spent barefoot, the big goofy Italian had feet so broad no shoe could fit him. Smiling his five-toothed grin, Plutarco finally shrugged and watched as Private Lipton cut holes in each boot for his little toe.

Despite the drab uniforms, the men were in a festive mood. They marched back and forth under the watchful eyes of the soldiers, pointing at their feet and laughing. “This is probably the first time many of them have worn new shoes,” Vito D’Amico explained. “Not just the first time since they joined the army, the first time ever. Next time anybody misbehaves, you don’t need to scare them with wild Indians, just threaten to take away their shoes.”

After dinner, Tom instructed the men to elect a leader for each of the barracks. The role of barracks leader would be a coveted one, because the leader would enjoy the only semi-private room in each building and the leaders would form a “camp council,” which in turn would elect a camp spokesman who would represent the prisoners to the American soldiers. “And for goodness sakes, Vito, make sure that the spokesmen know at least a little English, will you?”

"May I assume that leaves Plutarco out?" Vito responded jauntily, not waiting for an answer.

The next morning the M.P.s took one of the trucks back to Camp Gruber while Tom and Floyd showed Rob around the now-completed camp.

The camp was built to house 800 men, with room to expand to 1,200. The forty-man barracks were stacked six in a row, built diagonally to face another row of six barracks, forming a kind of chevron. The first building of each chevron was a mess hall, furnished with tables and benches to feed eighty men. Between each chevron was a road that ran the length of the camp, ending at the soccer field and tennis courts. To the left of the barracks was the handsome stone-chimneyed administration building, with private rooms for officers and non-coms.

Behind the administration building was a barracks similar to the others, but set up for ten men rather than forty, with lockers, room dividers and toilets. This was for the enlisted men like Private Lipton. This building was followed by the camp kitchen, which was in turn followed by the enormous all-purpose auditorium and gymnasium. This building also housed the library and musical instruments, including two studio upright pianos. The last building in this line contained the workshop, tool shed and motor pool.

On the right side of the camp were the canteen, a game room with ping-pong tables and the much-maligned billiards tables, and an outdoor meeting area. Tables and chairs scattered café-style took advantage of the old C.C.C. camp's concrete slabs to create an all-weather floor. Behind this was the infirmary. The last building on the right housed the showers.

There were two guard towers in the back that, although required by Army regulations, were detested by the bored soldiers who had to sit in them hour after hour. "The Devil's Penthouse" and "Hell's Waiting Room" were only two of the terms heaped on the little observation boxes.

After walking around the camp, the three men returned to the administration building to meet the four new permanent soldiers that Sergeant Hare had wrangled out of Major Appleton. Three of the men had gotten what was known as their "million-dollar wound," what the soldiers called an injury that wasn't mortal, but so bad that they could never return to combat. Two of the men still limped, one seriously. The fourth man, a bespectacled Private Emil Pipp, was so overweight and, as it turned out, nearsighted, he made Rob Luke look like Charles Atlas.

"Gentlemen," Sergeant Hare said, approaching the four soldiers now seated around the long conference table in the rear of the building, "I'd like you to meet your staff. Men, this is Lieutenant Tom Gregory, your commanding officer, and Lieutenant Rob Luke, your executive officer." The four men stood, snapped to attention and saluted.

"Morning, fellows," Tom said, returning their salute. "Please have a seat. As Sergeant Hare has probably told you, we're not real sticklers on protocol here. So let's agree that the only time we salute is when we're in front of the prisoners. They kind of expect that, I imagine. I'm Lieutenant Tom Gregory all right, and in case you're wondering how I got here, in addition to the fact that my left knee is completely shot, I am of Italian descent. I don't speak much Italian, however. Do any of you?"

"Some, yes sir," said a compact, dark-haired soldier. "My name is Corporal Victor Muñoz, and I speak Spanish so I can already understand a lot of what they say. I bought a Spanish-Italian dictionary when I was home on leave. The two languages are a lot alike."

Private Murray Lipton hurried by, carrying an armload of folders. "No surprise there. Both languages are vulgate Latin."

"Why, it's Doctor I.Q.," said Tom, waving for Lipton to stop. "Hi, Murray. I didn't get a chance to say hello yesterday. Your folks sure showed us a wonderful time in New York, and your father made me promise to let you play the piano every day."

"Way ahead of you there, Lieutenant," Lipton said. "I've been banging away ever since the pianos arrived last week; haven't I, Sergeant Hare?"

"Yes, if you consider Chopin and Beethoven 'banging,'" said an obviously impressed Hare. "Corporal Muñoz here is heading up the motor pool. A genius around trucks, so I hear. He and Floyd have already promised to build me a car from scratch. And this is P.F.C. David Orren, and this is Private Bob Connelly. They both got shot up pretty good in the Pacific, didn't you guys? But they're coming along fine now. They will be our supervising guards. And last but ... anyway, this is Private Emil Pipp. He's in charge of the kitchen and canteen."

"Emil, huh?" Rob Luke said with a laugh. "Maybe they should have sent you to one of those German camps."

"They did," Pipp replied in a steely voice that completely contradicted his soft exterior. "I'm Lithuanian. And I hate the Nazis, okay?" Then Pipp's internal storm passed and he smiled broadly. His

demeanor became as cheerful as it had just been ominous. “They originally sent me to this big German prison camp not far from here. When I told the executive officer that I was a cook and I couldn’t wait to serve the men their first meal, he took one look into my eyes and reassigned me here.” He laughed merrily.

No one else joined in. There was an embarrassing tension in the room until Sergeant Hare broke the silence. “Stop talking like that, Wally, you know you’re harmless.”

“Wally?” Tom asked. “How do you get Wally out of Emil?”

“Wally Pipp, Lieutenant,” Hare said amiably. “Remember him? He was the New York Yankee that Lou Gehrig replaced when Pipp had a headache. Gehrig played like fifteen years straight after that, and poor old Pipp never played for the Yankees again. So at Camp Gruber, his old sergeant told me Wally fits his nickname because, if you ever let him sit down, you could never get him back in the game.”

“I like the name Wally,” Pipp added. “And if it helps get me off work detail, so much the better.”

“Well, you’re a lucky man, Wally,” Tom said. “When you meet Pete Patterson pretty soon, he’ll turn you from a cook into a chef. He makes wonderful Italian food. So ... Orren and Connelly, you both got wounded in the Pacific?”

“Yes sir, Guadalcanal, both of us the same day, January twenty-eighth,” Private Connelly said. He was a fiery redhead with, as Tom’s mother might have said, the map of Ireland all over his face. “Dave lost part of his right foot in a mortar blast and I got my left kneecap shot off. We’ve been winning three-legged races at hospitals ever since, right, Dave?”

The other soldier, dark-complexioned with eyebrows that formed a single line across his face, just smiled and nodded.

“What about you, Muñoz? Sergeant Hare told me you were wounded, too. Where did you get it?” Tom asked.

Corporal Muñoz hesitated for just a moment, and then chuckled. “Geographically, Tobruk. Anatomically, I’m sitting on my million-dollar wound. You may not want to hear this. I understand the cringe factor can get pretty high.”

“Go ahead, Corporal Muñoz,” Connelly prodded. “Then I’ll tell you about finding Orren’s boot.”

“Okay, you asked for it,” Muñoz relented. “There were four or five of us in our dugout. We’d just come back from patrol and some of the guys were asleep before they hit the ground. I had just gotten inside, still had on all my gear, when one of those German potato masher grenades came bouncing in, right beside me. Another guy had come in behind me and was blocking the door. Funny how you can think everything through in just a split second, isn’t it? Anyway, I knew I was supposed to fall on it, but I thought fuck that—excuse me, sirs—I want at least a fighting chance; so I took off my helmet, put it over the grenade, and sat on it. The doctors tell me I’ll be pulling shrapnel out of my butt for the next twenty years.”

Tom shuddered involuntarily. “Jeez, you’re right, Muñoz. My pucker meter is off the chart. All right, let’s finish this off. So what about finding Orren’s boot, Connelly?”

“My toes were still in it,” Orren said with a shrug.

“Are there going to be enough men to guard the camp?” Tom asked Sergeant Hare. “Six enlisted men aren’t very many, and it looks to me that if you lined us up for a hundred yard dash, you could measure our time with a sundial.”

“If you had any idea how hard I had to cajole Major Appleton, you’d thank your lucky stars, Lieutenant.” Hare fired up another cigarette from a crumpled green pack. “Appleton says he can’t fill any of the camp requisitions fully, and he’s got to give priority to the bad boy Nazi camps at Alva and McAlester. Did you know the SS officers at Alva have only been there a week, and they already killed one of their own as a squealer, executed him with barbed wire? This camp, I’m happy to report, is considered the Major’s lowest security risk. That said, he’s promised to send us six more men on a rotating basis, doing thirty to sixty days down here while they’re waiting for reassignment. They’ll send our first batch down next week with the truck the M.P.s took out this morning. And Lieutenant, don’t sell those guys short. Muñoz got a Silver Star for his fast thinking, and both Connelly and Orren seem to be the real McCoy. A little jumpy maybe, but three months in Guadalcanal can do that to anybody.”

Tom idly picked up the cigarette pack Hare had just discarded. "I wonder if we'll ever get rid of these damned things. I'm getting to be like everybody else. I see this green bulls-eye and all I can see is P.O.W."

"We got enough of those little green coffin nail packs to last years, thanks to you, I guess," Hare said.

"While we're spinning war stories, how have you been doing, Jesse? It must have been hell in those Burmese jungles, with the Japanese soldiers on your tail for more than a month. Did you really get chased by elephants?"

"It was just one elephant, but I got to admit when you bump into one in the jungle, they got some size on them. You ever see that movie *Dumbo*? That's just how they look, great big ears and everything."

"I can't even begin to imagine. You okay to talk about it?"

"Sure. I'm still here and that's what counts. And in a crazy way he probably saved my life."

"He who?"

"The elephant. Yep, looking back on it, we were a lot the same, that elephant and me."

"The same?"

"Yeah. We were both on the lam," Hare said. "I'd been in the jungle for about three weeks by this time, my pistol and canteen were gone, I'd been drinking swamp water and had dysentery so bad ... well, real bad. The worst thing, though, worse than the Japs, were the mosquitoes, especially around sunset. You could hear them come out, sounding like a gigantic electric turbine. It just drove me crazy. So late one afternoon, my eyes and nose all swollen up already, I see a clearing a couple of hundred yards ahead. I thought I'd make a break for it, even though the chances of getting spotted by the Japs would go way, way up. Frankly, I didn't care. It wouldn't be my first, or last, fate-worse-than-death moment."

He nervously lit another cigarette, then looked at the ashtray to see he already had one going. "What the hell? Losing my marbles. So anyway, just as I was thinking this through, there was this huge noise of breaking tree limbs and the ground started shaking and all of a sudden there he was—big, red watery eyes and giant ears. He was making little yipping sounds like a junkyard dog, not at all the kind of sounds I thought an elephant would make. When he saw me, he stopped dead in his tracks and started bellowing. This time he sounded like an elephant. He had big old leg irons on his front legs, just like those guys in chain

gang movies. His legs were bloody where the flesh had just been torn off, and there was foamy blood coming out of his mouth. I could see in his eyes he was crazy and I was probably going to get stomped to death. So I just stood there, frozen. And so did he. And then, I don't know, it dawned on me that he had probably run away from somebody, whoever had put those chains on him; and big and crazy as he was, he was scared of humans. So I started waving both arms in the air and ran straight at him, screaming 'Shoo!' He gave a big roar, wheeled around and went crashing into the clearing. He made it maybe a hundred yards or so when the Jap machine guns opened up. They must have hit him a hundred times; I could hear the *thump, thump, thump* of the bullets. Then he started running sideways, and then he just sat down, like he was all tuckered out. That's when I heard the Japanese laughing. They were that close." Hare crushed his finished cigarette under the sole of his boot. "The elephant saved my life. I turned around, got the hell out of there and lived to swat mosquitoes another day. So that's my charging elephant story. What about you, Lieutenant? Any war stories?"

Tom was quiet, then broke into a sheepish grin. "Well, yes, but I've got to warn you that when I tell this story, grown men weep and women faint. It was the third quarter of the Thiel-Slippery Rock game, and if you had seen the eyes of that Slippery Rock linebacker just before he tackled me, you would have known the full force of unbridled fury. And no disrespect to Corporal Muñoz, but my helmet was leather, not steel. I can remember lying there thinking I could probably forget dancing with that good-looking cheerleader at the homecoming sock hop that night." He gave a rueful shake of his head. "See? I told you it was gruesome."

"You poor son of a bitch," Hare deadpanned, then they both collapsed in laughter.



Things at Chigger Lake slipped into a predictable, but not unpleasant, routine by mid-July, 1943. With the Army's complete blessings, Connie Ballard made Weleetka her primary station. Lacking living quarters at the camp and not wanting to commute the fifty miles to Camp Gruber, she moved in with Oklahoma Garland. "Please come, Connie," Oklahoma pleaded. "I'm just rattling around in that old house now that Dale's gone. I could use the company, you can walk to the V.F.W., and Tom's only two blocks away ... in case that interests you."

"He is a pretty good-looking cuss, isn't he?" Connie said. "If a man can blush, tell a good joke and laugh at yours, I think that makes him a keeper, don't you?"

"A weekly bath doesn't hurt," Oklahoma nodded in agreement. "That and bay rum. I'm a sucker for bay rum."

With Floyd's carpentry and Pete's expertise, the V.F.W. Hall became a huge bakery and food production center. Ennio Venturini proved an able and dependable head cook and baker. Under the supervision of P.F.C. Orren, who was in a dead heat with Jesse Hare for Insomniac of the Decade honors, Ennio and two dozen fellow prisoners would arrive at the enormous building promptly at ten p.m. There they would work through each night baking two thousand loaves of bread—the big, melon-sized crusty brown loaves favored by the Germans and the yard-long baguettes made for the Italians ... and, as it turned out, the officers' mess at Camp Gruber.

Ennio would have the bread baked and boxed by six in the morning, where it was picked up and trucked to P.O.W. camps in Tonkawa, Okmulgee, Wewoka, McAlester and Alva.

At Floyd's suggestion, every Monday night the men came in an hour early and, with the help of Dora Clark, made pies, cakes and pastries

for Connie and the local women who worked the day shift, as well as for Oklahoma Garland and her burgeoning group of townswomen she now called her “book brigade.” Every Tuesday morning Oklahoma and the brigade would visit the camp, passing out and reading books aloud, especially the easy-to-understand Little Blue Books with their numerous illustrations, and teaching English. They used the pastries as rewards.

It quickly became known around Weleetka that Tuesday mornings were a fine time to drop in on the V.F.W. Hall for a visit, a piece of pie and coffee before heading off to work. Connie anticipated this and brewed gallons of coffee, complete with the increasingly scarce and heavily-rationed sugar. Ham Hamby, the Brainard brothers and Ed Carter were always there, which Oklahoma counted as a public relations coup. From their childhood days together in school, Oklahoma remembered Ham’s love of rhubarb pie, so she asked Dora and Ennio to make a special Hamby Pie every week.

Unfortunately, the Hamby Pie came with the Hamby Curse: Skeeter Hamby. Accompanied at first by only the twins, Skeeter’s entourage soon grew to encompass half of the Weleetka Outlaws high school football team.

“Skeeter, you and your friends are welcome here,” Oklahoma remarked one morning, “but when your father’s pie is gone, it’s gone. And we don’t mind you filling your mouths, but not your pockets. Those pastries are for the women here and at the camp who actually help out, if you get my drift.”

“Aw, Miss Garland, give me a break, will ya?” Skeeter whined. “Them dagos already got all the butter and sugar in Weleetka, the least we can do is put ‘em to work doing something worthwhile. What’s the use of having slave labor if they won’t labor?” He laughed at what he considered brilliant word play.

Connie chimed in, “Don’t you dare let Lieutenant Gregory hear you use that word again. Me either, for that matter. And for your information, they are not slave labor. They’re volunteers, every one of them, and they get an honest day’s pay for an honest day’s work.”

“More than we can say about some folks,” Oklahoma muttered.

“Wait just a dang minute,” Skeeter hooted. “You telling me that besides giving them food, clothes and pool tables, we got to pay ‘em to work? Where do I sign up?”

“Right here,” P.F.C. Orren said darkly. “I’d love to have you working directly under me. You and your friends aren’t too young to enlist, you know.”

“We do pay them, Skeeter, just like the Geneva Convention dictates,” Connie said pleasantly, trying to tamp down the fire before it got any hotter. “P.O.W.s are not required to work, but they can volunteer for farm work, picking fruit and vegetables, or for jobs like here at the commissary. The farmers pay the Army a dollar fifty a day, and the prisoner gets to keep half of that.”

“So not only does he eat better than we do, and free at that, he gets paid, too.” Skeeter turned theatrically to his gang. “Hey boys, seems these Italian gentlemen are loaded with walk-around money. I think I know where we can do a little business with some bootleg Chock.”

“The men don’t get the money directly,” P.F.C. Orren explained. “It’s put into a pool for them at the camp canteen, where the P.O.W.s can use it for candy or magazines, records, stuff like that. And the men love to work. Breaks up the routine.”

Skeeter stopped mid-doughnut in thought. “Money must pile up pretty quick, I imagine. C’mon boys, let’s go swimming before the prisoners take over the lake, too.”

At the Chigger Lake camp, Tom was pleased that the men had elected Aldo Pensotti, the English-speaking conductor and violinist the men called *Il Maestro*, as camp representative. Somehow he exuded dignity, even in his black prison outfit. He was probably no more than forty, but his ramrod-straight posture and flinty eyes made him seem older and more powerful. Tom could easily imagine the man holding an orchestra in thrall with a single withering stare, as he had seen the elfin Toscanini do in the newsreels. When the man’s election was announced, some of the men from Southern Italy teased him, calling him *Capo di tutti Capi*, Boss of all Bosses, like he was a Mafia chieftain; but he just smiled, slowly raised his right arm as if he were about to give the down beat, and the entire auditorium fell silent.

Pensotti worked with Vito D’Amico to encourage the men to learn English, and soon the combination of their urging, pastry treats, and the usual camp boredom had the auditorium overflowing on Tuesday mornings. It didn’t hurt that among Oklahoma’s book brigade was a

handful of young, attractive Weleetkan women, including Mary Beth Devine. Just as Pete had predicted, Mary Beth was pleased to see that, indeed, the men seemed more attentive when she leaned in close and pouted her recitations. Pete, who occasionally joined the Tuesday morning classes, was sorry he had ever suggested it.

"You don't have to get so close," he scowled. "A lot of these guys may have picked up something over there in Africa and all those places. You never know what you could catch."

"Shows what you know, Mister Smarty," Mary Beth countered. "Mister D'Amico told me that every one of them got their shots and even D.D.T. baths. That's more than I can say for some of the guys I dated in high school."

Tom had suggested that Private Lipton use this time to practice the piano, and Lipton readily agreed. "It will be like playing under concert conditions," Lipton said. "And they can't walk out or ask for their money back."

Tom, Vito, Aldo and Oklahoma, sometimes joined by Pete and Connie, regularly sat in on Lipton's weekly concerts, which were highly polished despite his self-deprecation.

"I am thankful for the orange juice and cigarettes," Vito said. "But this? This is almost worth getting captured for. This guy is one of the finest pianists I have heard in years. When this war is over, and if I can get my job back in Verona, I'm going to invite him to play at the Arena. We'll use the full opera orchestra, and *Maestro*, you will conduct."

"*Grazie, don Vito*," Aldo said quietly.

Oklahoma Garland laughed. "Mister D'Amico, you always take me off guard. It will take me a while to get used to an Italian prisoner of war with a Brooklyn accent."

"Please call me Vito. And I must say, after Lieutenant Gregory showed us all those movies of Indians shooting arrows and killing people, the last thing I was expecting in Indian Territory was a charming and highly educated woman who loves classical music."

"Oh brother," Connie groaned. "Well, I wouldn't say I love classical music ... oh, were you talking about Miss Garland? So, Vito, Lieutenant Luke tells me that you used to run an opera company in Italy. Did you know that the highly-educated and charming Miss Garland here sings opera? Sang the lead in her college production of, what was it?"

"*Cavalleria Rusticana*," said an unaccustomedly-shy Oklahoma, then added hurriedly, "You ran an opera company Mister, um, Vito?"

"Yes, Miss Garland, the Arena Opera in Verona. Do you know Verona?"

"Only that it's the setting for *Romeo and Juliet*."

"Ah, the doomed lovers of Verona," Vito said. "They say the very balcony from Shakespeare's soliloquy is only a hundred meters from my apartment." He shrugged. "Maybe they're right, maybe not. But the most important edifice in Verona by far is the Arena, where the operas are performed. Imagine, Miss Garland, a second-century Roman coliseum, not so large as Rome, perhaps, but in far better condition."

D'Amico walked the few feet to the piano so he could stand and gesture with his hands. "Every summer we have the most splendid opera season. People come from everywhere, thousands to see opera under the stars. When people say 'grand opera,' they must mean Verona, because there is no grander. Some of the operas like *Nabucco* and *Aida* need this grand setting to fulfill their grand promise. Three years ago—is it possible that it was only three years?—we performed *Aida* with real elephants. I wanted to use a real lion, too, but the tenor was afraid. It's opera as good as La Scala, only five times bigger, and with the moon as a chandelier. And the people. Oh, Miss Garland, you must come to Verona during the season just to see the people. The entire Old City is built like a wheel, with the coliseum as the hub. And surrounding the arena are dozens of outdoor restaurants where people collect hours before the concert, studying the *libretto*, arguing if this soprano or that soprano is superior, drinking cup after cup of espresso, smoking cigarettes, shouting, laughing. It's opera heaven."

"And here is its theme song," announced Murray Lipton, who had been listening. He began a series of familiar, bird-like arpeggios, then followed with three thunderous chords. Out of nowhere he was joined at the piano by the handsome young tenor Angelo Festa, who started singing quietly, almost nonchalantly.

"Oh my God," Oklahoma gasped. "How perfect."

"What is it?" Connie asked.

"It's '*Va, pensiero*,' the prisoners' chorus from *Nabucco*," Oklahoma whispered, transfixed.

As the young tenor sang wistfully, effortlessly, Aldo quietly got out of his chair and stood beside Vito. When Festa repeated the refrain "Fly, thoughts, on wings of gold," the two other men joined in, Vito as baritone and Aldo as bass. Their voices rose and fell in unison as if they sang

together every day. Then one by one, other prisoners gathered around the piano. When Murray hit the chord to begin the rousing bridge and chorus, a dozen voices rang out, building and then falling again to a finale that never quite came, just hung in the air, exactly as Verdi had written it. Everyone fell into an expectant silence, even Murray, leaving only the thin and dream-like single note held for bar after bar by the tenor and bass.

When they had at last trailed out that final lonely note to its conclusion, there were five seconds of silence, filled with appreciative glances. Then the men laughed heartily, slapped each other on the back, and returned to their lessons.

“That was the most beautiful thing I have ever heard,” Connie said as Vito and Aldo rejoined them.

“Me, too,” Oklahoma said, holding her hand to her throat. “Tom, I want to ask an enormous favor. Would you allow the prisoners....” She interrupted herself and turned to D’Amico. “Vito, I just hate calling you that.” She turned back to Tom. “Would you allow the men to sing that again for the Watermelon Festival next month? I think it might improve relations with the town if they see the men enjoying the same things we do.” She turned back to Vito. “You were absolutely magnificent. You sounded like you’ve been practicing together for years. I just can’t believe it.” She took Vito’s hand, and the entire table noticed.

To pierce the awkward silence, Aldo Pensotti said in his best English, “Perhaps, madam, we have been practicing all our lives, just not together. To us, opera is everywhere. Our mamas sing it to us in our baby beds. It is in our wine, in our pasta. It is in the street singers, the gondoliers, and even our dogs—how do you say it—bark on key. To sing together like that, we cannot take credit. It is, frankly, a piece of pie.”

Oklahoma patted Vito’s hand once more, then wiped away the remnants of a tear. “I understand, *Maestro*, and I wouldn’t have missed this moment for anything.” She smiled. “And for future reference, Mister Pensotti, the phrase is ‘piece of cake.’”



Tom, Connie and Murray sat on the floating dock at the lake. They were watching Floyd, about twenty yards off to their left, expertly casting his fishing plug and dropping it on a shadow of a low-hanging sycamore. Floyd would let the plug hit the water, then watch it sink just a second or two before reeling it back in a slow, steady motion, occasionally moving the plug from side to side like a minnow or a grasshopper.

Connie dangled her feet in the water as always, kicking a few drops on Tom from time to time when she thought he was being inattentive. “Does my splashing bother your fishing, Floyd?” she asked.

“Nah, the sun’s directly overhead anyway, which keeps the smart fish away. It’s just target practice, mostly. There’s a big old granddaddy bass back in there, but he’s probably napping in those weeds. I doubt I could get him out with a stick of dynamite.”

“Do you Creeks go dynamite fishing? I know my uncles did over at Pauls Valley,” Connie said. “They wouldn’t let us kids watch, but I know they did it.”

“Well, we don’t do that anymore, and never did it much, truth be told. Too dangerous. If you did it too often, you could kill a pond right off. We only did it for pow-wows and feasts, times when we needed a lot of fish in a hurry. And we were always sure to thank the fish.”

“Well, I don’t know,” Murray said. “Sounds kind of cruel to me.”

“That’s what city folks always say when it gets around to killing food.” Floyd shook his head. “We used to have some real good talks about this when I was in the boat going over to France. Tell me, son, do you think the fish like it better when we kill them one at a time? If that’s so, then I got some explaining to do to some crawdaddies.”

"You eat crawdads?" Tom asked. "They look too ugly to eat."

Floyd laughed. "You boil them up in a fish stew, they're scrumptious and pretty as can be, kinda red and crunchy. But Murray, my son, *you* might want to steer clear of them. Before the water gets boiling, those little guys just swim around and around in the big ol' pot, clicking their little claws against the side, doing the backstroke and the crawl, then they just wave their little feelers bye-bye, turn red and die. They don't even have time to close their little eyes." His demeanor turned solemn and he put a hand over his heart. "I used to have a job in a crawdad factory, closing their eyes after they passed away. That was during the Depression, of course, and jobs were scarce."

"You are the biggest liar in America," Connie said. "And rapidly turning me into a vegetarian."

"Speaking of vegetables," Tom said, "Ed Carter was telling me something about a green corn festival that he was going to be in charge of. He didn't say much, you know he never does, but I got the impression it was some kind of Creek Indian deal. Am I right?"

"Oh, it's not just the Creeks," Connie said enthusiastically. "All of us Five Civilized Tribes celebrate the Green Corn Ceremonies. It's our Christmas and New Year's all rolled into one. My mother took me to one when I was just a kid. I got to sleep outside all night with all the other women. I felt so grown up. They even let me do the women's ribbon dance." Her eyes took on a wistful, faraway look. "It's been a long time since I thought about that. City girl now, I guess. Is that coming up, Floyd?"

"Uh-huh," Floyd nodded. "They've already passed out the twig bundles, so it's in a couple of weeks, just before the full moon." He turned to Tom. "Ed's the *Micco*, that's what we call our chiefs, of Alabama Town. Towns is what we still call all the villages around here. It's at the stomp grounds down in Dustin. This may not be as big as some years, 'cause so many boys are off in the war, but it should be fun. Do you all want to come? You'll even get to see one of our famous ball games."

"Count me in," Murray said. "That is, can I, Lieutenant?"

"Sure, I guess so," Tom answered. "Unless it conflicts with the Watermelon Festival, whatever and whenever that is. We promised Miss Garland that the prisoners would perform, remember?"

"No worries there, Lieutenant," Murray replied. "The *Maestro* has already rounded up a dozen men for what they're calling the Chigger Lake Men's Chorus. Vito came up with the name. I kind of like it."

"Leave it to Vito to make prisoners of war sound like a glee club," Tom said. "But okay. I'd like to see the Green Corn Ceremonies myself, if I can get away. Want to come with me, Connie? Got to warn you, though, don't expect to see me stomping around the old stomp grounds. I've got two left feet."

"They probably won't let you dance anyway, big guy, much as I'd love to see it," Connie said. "It's just for Indians, right, Floyd?"

Floyd finished reeling in his line. "Oh, that used to be so in the old days, but not anymore. I'll check with Ed Carter, but as long as you show respect and act with dignity, you'll be welcome. We won't go for the whole thing; that lasts four days. We'll just go for the Hunter's Dance, or maybe the Buffalo Dance, that's the third day and the one where we get to eat just before. We have to fast the first two days and drink the black drink, so we can get rid of a whole year's worth of anger and jealousy and stuff. But I got to warn you—when we say dance, we don't mean a foxtrot. The Hunters Dance is easier than the Gun Dance, but that doesn't mean it's for sissies. It can take three or four hours. And once you get started, we expect you to stomp 'til you can't stomp anymore. What do you say, Murray? Want to be my dancing partner?"

Murray grinned. "I don't think I've ever done anything in my life for four hours straight except play the piano, and you get to do that sitting down. But heck yes, Floyd, as I said, count me in. You with me, Lieutenant Gregory?"

"Mmm, on second thought, I think I'll save myself for the Watermelon Festival."

"Shoot," Connie pouted. "And here I was going to come along with my Brownie Hawkeye and get Oklahoma to put your tangle-footed picture on the front page."

"You could take my picture, Lieutenant Connie," Murray said. "The headline could read 'Lost Tribe of Israel Member Found at Stomp Grounds.' My father would get a kick out of that. So what's the black drink you mentioned?"

Connie playfully punched Floyd on the shoulder. "It's yuck, that's what it is. We Chickasaws call it the white drink, but in any language, it's Indian for 'throw up.' That's one thing I know they won't let a white man drink, and you better thank your lucky stars."

"It would take too much of it to purify a white man anyway, some would say." Floyd turned to look toward a figure walking along the road. "Here comes Lieutenant Luke, looking like he just won the Irish Sweepstakes. Wonder what's up? Hey, Lieutenant," he waved, "who's minding the fort?"

"Hey, everybody," Rob Luke shouted back. He was obviously excited, because his apple cheeks were florid. "Guess what? Remember that announcement you put in the *Weleetka American* last week saying that the Army would be willing to contract with farmers for P.O.W. day labor? Well, we just got our first customer. His name is Wingo, his farm is about five miles from here on the Wetumka Road, and he says he can use ten men for a whole month, picking watermelons. A whole month, can you imagine? No wonder they have a watermelon festival. We'll be hip deep in them by that time."

"Wingo? For some reason I know that name, Floyd," Tom remarked.

"Yes, Lieutenant, that was the family of the boy they were bringing off the train when you and I first met. This is the boy's uncle, Johnny Man Wingo. I know him real well. He's got a son overseas, too. He's a good man. He'll treat them right and pay up on time. And I got a hunch you're going to get another customer pretty soon, Lieutenant Luke. Johnny Man's sister has a big peach orchard just down the road from him. Mary Cox. Her husband got killed at Pearl Harbor." Floyd looked off into the distance. "Everybody said it would be good luck all around, having an Oklahoman on the *Oklahoma*. Didn't turn out that way. Mary's been using Johnny Man and the rest of the Wingos to pick her peaches, but the supply of Wingos is on the decline, just like a bunch of families around here."

Floyd picked up his fishing gear and they started walking toward the car. "You know, peaches, watermelon, too, for that matter, are like most things in nature, up to and including babies. When they're ready to come, they come. All you can do is hold on and make the best of it. Lieutenant Luke is right. In a couple of weeks you won't be able to swing a cat without hitting a watermelon. That's one of the main reasons we started having the watermelon festival. In late June, watermelon's ten cents a pound, and we're bringing them up from Texas. Three weeks later, like right now, they're a nickel a pound and high on everybody's shopping list. There'll be roadside stands all the way from Rush Springs

to Tulsa. By late August, they're a penny a pound if they can get it, so we just have a big old festival and eat watermelons 'til they come out of our ears, have watermelon eating and throwing contests, greased watermelon races, crank out watermelon sherbet and let the kids go nuts with watermelon fights and wearing watermelon hats and stuff."

"Can't they plant them at different times of the year, stagger them a little bit?" Murray asked.

"You wouldn't be the first person to think about that," Floyd said. "But if you live out here in the country, you learn pretty quick that crops talk to the farmers, not the other way around. All the farmers can do is pray and cuss, and not necessarily in that order."

"Well, I can't help anybody much with the watermelon, but the Army will let me buy a ton of peaches," Connie said. "We'll can them, pickle them, and at least for a few weeks have some of the finest peach cobbler known to humanity. Old Chickasaw recipe. Rob, you let me know exactly how many workers you have going out every day. I'll need to get together with Wally Pipp to fix and deliver box lunches for all the pickers."

"Good idea," Rob said. "Corporal Muñoz and I will go guard the men picking watermelons, and I'll get Wally to go with the men picking peaches. He might as well go, all he does in the kitchen is sit around and watch Pete's guys and the prisoners make lunch and dinner—in between naps. If Pipp is saving himself for something important later, I swear we'll have to tear off the cellophane before we can use him."

By early August, Tom had more than one hundred men in the fields, harvesting corn, summer squash and beets as well as the peaches and watermelons. Every morning Private Pipp drove one of the big deuce-and-a-half trucks around to each farm with the box lunches, always making sure he ended his run at Mary Cox's peach orchard, where he and the men could eat their fill of the very ripe peaches which were too ripe for market but still very delicious.

One particularly warm day, Wally took his usual seat against one of the gnarly old-growth peach trees on the crest of a hill that gave him a good view of the P.O.W. pickers. He leaned his rifle against the side of the tree, ate a juicy peach the size of a small grapefruit, and fell sound asleep.

When he opened his eyes, he saw two things. One was that the sun on his left shoulder indicated it was mid-afternoon, which meant he had been asleep for more than an hour. The other was Plutarco, squatting directly in front of him, Wally's rifle in his lap.

"Oh, Jesus, man, don't shoot," Wally whispered hoarsely, raising his arms.

Beaming his cavity-encrusted five-tooth grin, Plutarco offered the rifle back to Wally the way a mayor offers a visiting dignitary the key to the city. "Hey, you, me, American GI boy. You give me one cigarette for please?" Plutarco asked laughingly in the mangled English that only he fully understood.



The first Chigger Lake prisoner to escape was Antonio Aranetto, the blacksmith the other prisoners called Tough Tony. He claimed later it was not premeditated, but he was a man consumed with a fiery passion, and when he saw his opportunity, he took it.

Antonio had fallen hopelessly in love with Mary Cox. Picking peaches was hot, sticky work, and Mary never failed to bring buckets of ice water, sometimes iced tea, to the thirsty men who would stand courteously with their tin cups outstretched. Standing before them in her always freshly-laundered flour sack dresses, the thin and mousy-haired widow may have seemed plain to the Weleetka townsfolk, but to Antonio she was the vision of love personified. A big, beefy man who perspired freely in any case, Antonio began consuming dromedary-sized draughts of whatever liquid was being offered just for the opportunity to stare calf-like at Mary as she refilled his cup.

"You again, Mister Prisoner?" Mary laughed. "You must have a hollow leg, my big friend. You must have a name as well." She slowed her speech and raised her voice, believing as so many do that being monolingual causes partial deafness. She put her hand to her chest. "My name is Mary. What is your name?" She patted his chest. "What. Is. Your. Name?"

Antonio was thunderstruck. And tongue-tied. It was the first time a woman other than his mother and sisters had ever touched him, and most of his sisters' touches could more properly be defined as punches. He knew Mary was addressing him, but all he could do was stare bashfully at his feet.

"*Dicale il vostro nome,*" Moro Morino, the postman of Bardolino, said derisively as he passed by. "Sorry, lady," Morino added. "He's no intending. His name is Antonio—Antonio Aranetto."

Hearing his name, Antonio snapped to attention, both arms stiffly at his side. “*Si, signora,*” he said in his best schoolboy-to-nun voice, “Antonio Aranetto, Aranetto *di Ferraro, alla servizi.*”

“He say he from Ferraro, at your service,” Moreno said proudly, glad to give his own language skills an airing.

“Pleased to meet you, Mister Antonio,” Mary said. “I am Mary Cox from Wetumka, at your service, too.” She giggled and Antonio fell into love’s abyss.

So one brilliant Sunday afternoon in August, Antonio, who was playing sweeper for the Bravo barracks soccer team, cleared his goal with a prodigious kick that was still climbing as it reached mid-field. The ball soared over the field, over the barbed wire fence, and bounded down the gravel Lake Weleetka Road.

The other men yelled angrily at him and ran over to the guard tower. It contained Wally Pipp, who had drawn the unenviable assignment of watching a game he neither liked nor understood. Alternately waving and pointing, first at Antonio, then at the lake road, the men shouted something, the only word of which Wally understood was “*futbol.*”

“I wish to hell it was football,” Wally said as he stood up, stretched and yawned. “Then maybe I could understand what this whole mess is all about. If you think I’m going to walk all the way down there just to fetch that ball, you got another think coming.” He started pointing in various directions while he spoke. “You guys kicked the damn thing, you guys go get it. I’m going to go take a leak. You understand? Leak? Pee-pee?”

Antonio nodded and trotted down through the camp, out the stone gates and just kept going. When Private Pipp returned at last, the men had borrowed a ball from Delta barracks and resumed the game, with Plutarco subbing as sweeper. Wally climbed back into his aerie and thought no more about it.

Antonio knew exactly where he was going. He’d been on the Wetumka Road a dozen times, and at last he would have the opportunity to woo his lady love in peace and solitude. Perhaps a serenade? Yes, perfect. Antonio had seen this done in the movies, and even knew many of the American words to a song that was popular back in Italy. Rubbing dirt on the front of his pants to obscure the painted P and W, and wearing

only his soccer undershirt, he walked resolutely and unnoticed past the cornfields and peach orchards to Mary Cox’s house. On the way he sang the words over and over again to stamp them in his memory.

He reached Mary’s trim little two-story clapboard house, wishing he had been able to bathe and wear cleaner clothes. That’s all right, he thought, this time just the singing. Next time maybe the kissing.

Although there was no sign of life in the house, the windows above the front porch were open. Knowing he only had seconds before he lost his nerve, Antonio launched into his serenade.

“You belong to my heart,” Antonio crooned loudly, “now in forever. You belong to my heart, forever mine.” Now came the hard part, but Antonio was determined. “In my heart, in my heart, in my heart, in my heart forever. You are mine, you are mine, you are mine, you are mine to my heart.” He swept his arm plaintively to the open windows as he had seen them do in the movies, hoping his bravado gestures would mask his uncertain lyrics.

Nothing. So he sang it again, louder. Still nothing. So he sang it in its original Spanish, “*Solamente una vez,*” but he found he actually remembered fewer lyrics in Spanish, so he switched back to English, and turned the volume up another notch.

Just as his resolve was crumbling, Mary popped her head out of one of the very windows Antonio had been targeting.

“Why, hello there,” she said pleasantly. “Mister Antonio, isn’t it? I don’t believe you are supposed to be here, Mister Antonio. Not today, at any rate. Your music is very pretty, but you must go back to your camp.” She pointed in the general direction of Chigger Lake. “Your camp? Your *campo*? Oh darn, I wish I had gone to college. Stay,” she said, aware she was using the same hand signals she would with a Labrador retriever. “Stay right there. Would you like some lemonade?” She mimed drinking from a cup. “Lemonade? *Lemonado*?”

When she got downstairs, she could see that Antonio had remained politely frozen in place, a dozen paces from the front steps. She went to the big wooden telephone box on the wall in the living room and gave the crank a couple of turns.

“Oh, hi, Velda,” Mary said when the operator came on. “Do you have any idea where that Lieutenant Gregory is? I’ve got one of his men standing out in my front yard, singing his lungs out. No, a prisoner. No, I’m fine. Could you ask the Lieutenant to come pick him up? Tell him there’s no hurry. I’ve never been serenaded before.”

Tom hung up the phone at the V.F.W. hall where he, Connie, Pete and Mary Beth had gone for a snack after the matinee at the Royal. Mary Beth had closed the box office early, as she often did on Sundays.

Tom frowned. "Mary Beth, I need to borrow Pete for a little while. Pete, Velda said she's been looking all over for me. Seems one of the prisoners is out in Mary Cox's front yard, singing love songs, for goodness sakes. Will you come along with me? I may need some help in talking him into the car."

Just then, the phone rang again. On the other end was a very agitated Dora Clark.

"Oh, Tom, thank God I got hold of you," Dora said, her voice quivering. "I think I just did something terrible. You've got to get out to Mary Cox's right away."

"Now calm down, Mrs. Clark. Pete and I are already on our way," Tom said. "Why are you so upset?"

"Oh, Tom. Me and my big mouth," said Dora. "Velda called looking for you, and I told her I hadn't seen you. Then I don't know what I was thinking, I turned to some of the men sitting here waiting for their catfish like they do every Sunday, and I said something like 'Looks like one of Lieutenant Gregory's Italians flew the coop.' So stupid! Hamby was in here and so was that big old Joseph Atubby, a couple of other men. Hamby started in yelling at me and I couldn't think straight. When he asked me where the prisoners were, I said Mary Cox's. They tore out of here a few minutes ago. Oh, I'm so sorry. I'm scared, Tom."

It was almost dusk when Tom and Pete reached Mary Cox's house. They could see a pickup and a few cars parked in the side yard, and Mary Cox running down the long driveway to intercept them. She was sobbing.

"Lieutenant, come quick," she cried as she leaned into the window of Tom's Ford. "They've got one of your people, that Mister Antonio, trapped in the tool shed. He didn't do anything, sir. They just came running at him and when I tried to stop them, they just pushed me down on the ground. It's Joseph Atubby, and Johnny Man's with them and Mister Hamby, too. Mister Hamby has a rope. I think they're going to hang him." She was crying so hard Tom could barely understand her. "Please hurry. They're going to kill him. He only wanted to serenade me. And drink lemonade."

They parked a few yards behind the cluster of men surrounding the tool shed. Tom leaned across Pete, opened the glove compartment and got out his holstered service pistol.

Pete asked in surprise, "Do you think that's going to be necessary, Tom?"

"I hope to hell not," Tom answered, "but I am sworn to protect my prisoners, God help me. You might want to walk a little behind me. And get Mary out of the way, will you? She's hysterical."

Tom adjusted his holster as he got out of the car. He walked slowly beyond the porch where a man was sitting on the steps, holding his head. "Evening Mister Hamby, evening gentlemen," he said pleasantly, almost like he was telling a joke. "I understand you've found one of my lost prisoners. I am much obliged. Now, if you'll excuse me."

"Now wait just a damned minute," Hamby shouted. "You're not taking him anywhere. We're taking his sorry ass into town and throwing him into jail, where he belongs."

Tom continued in the same pleasant voice, "What are you going to put him in jail for, serenading without a license?"

"Try assault and battery, for one," Hamby said angrily, pointing to the man on the steps. "And attempted rape for another. He's coming with us. And if he doesn't, we're going to take care of it right here."

"That's a damn lie, Mister Hamby," Mary said through her tears. "He didn't do anything to me or anybody else. He was just standing here, and that man over there rushed him and hit him in the head with a rake. He was bleeding real bad when he ran into the shed."

The man on the steps, still holding his head, started talking to his shoes. "Only did it 'cause Hamby said he was dangerous. Maybe I bonked him a little hard, but that didn't give that big ox no call to hit me upside the head. His damn fist felt like it was made out of lead."

The group was stand-off quiet for a few seconds, and Tom moved his hand slightly to unsnap the flap on the canvas holster.

They all heard the motor at the same time. Tom looked with relief over Hamby's shoulder to see Sergeant Hare and Corporal Muñoz pull up in their jeep. As they got out, Corporal Muñoz swung his carbine into port arms, ready for whatever came next.

"Afternoon, Lieutenant Gregory," Sergeant Hare said. "We came as soon as we got the word. Any trouble?"

“Not anymore, I think,” Tom replied. “We’ve got one of our prisoners holed up in the tool shed. Apparently he’s been banged up a little and may be bleeding, but I’ll get Pete to come explain that it’s safe now, and you can take him back to camp. Pete, you can do that, can’t you?”

Pete and Sergeant Hare got to the door of the tool shed and found the bleeding and dazed Antonio Aranetto sitting on the ground. They led him down to the jeep, with Mary running circles around them.

“I’m so sorry, Mister Antonio,” she said, still sniffing. “It was all my fault for making that stupid phone call. I hope you’re not hurt.” Even through his cobwebs, Antonio could see which way the wind was blowing, and gave Mary the sad and noble look of Jean Val Jean headed for the guillotine.

Tom stood next to Hamby, put his hand on Hamby’s shoulder and spoke in a voice only Hamby could hear.

“Stand very quietly right where you are and listen to me. I’ve got two important things to tell you. First, if you make any attempt to stop Sergeant Hare, I just might take this forty-five automatic and blow your big toe off. You got that? Second, tomorrow, if you can still walk, you and I are going to have a little chat about who commands these prisoners.” He removed his hand and raised his voice so everyone could hear. “And please remind your son Skeeter that football practice starts next week. I’ll be coaching the Outlaws this year and we expect big things from him.” He raised his voice even louder. “From your son, too, Mister Atubby. Thanks for helping me round up my prisoner. Now let’s all go home now.”

As Tom and Pete slowly drove back to town, Pete broke their silence. “That was a close one, my friend. And may I say you acted every inch the *comandante* out there.”

“Thanks, Pete. If I didn’t have both hands on the steering wheel, I’d be shaking like a leaf. Whew. I haven’t seen so many angry villagers since they stormed Doctor Frankenstein’s castle.”

“Excuse me?” Pete asked.

“Nothing, Pete. Just another one of my crazy movie references. Let’s go pick up the girls and take them to dinner. It’s catfish night at Mrs. Clark’s.



Tom woke early the next morning to find Floyd already on their shared front porch, drinking hot tea and squinting into the morning sun.

“Hey, Floyd,” Tom said. “Where were you last night? I waited up for you until almost midnight. We have some work to do today at the camp.”

“Sorry, Lieutenant, a bunch of us guys were down at Dustin last night, putting the final touches on the green corn town, setting up the brush arbors and such. The ceremonies start in three days. The kettle’s still hot if you want some tea or Postum. If you want coffee, we’ll have to mosey over to Connie’s.”

“You actually say ‘mosey?’ That’s great. I’ll tell you as we mosey. But I’ve got another idea,” Tom offered. “Why don’t we walk over to Mrs. Clark’s for a regular breakfast. I’m a couple of quarts low on gravy and I could use a walk ... and a little advice. What do you say?”

As they walked down the chocolate-colored dirt street to Clark’s Café, Tom said, “You know, I’ve been meaning to ask you. This is a beautiful little town, but some mornings, like today, the whole place smells like the inside of an eight-man army tent. What is that?”

“That? I hardly notice it anymore. That’s oil. Twice a month in the summertime, a truck comes down and sprays the road. It keeps the dust down and builds up the road ‘til it’s almost like being paved. When it rains the water just runs right off. I kind of like the smell if I think about it at all. It’s like the sound of the oil wells, I don’t hear it anymore. The only time I’d probably notice would be if they ever stopped.” Floyd grew quiet as they walked, both pretending to listen to the pumping of the little “grasshopper” oil wells.

After an appropriate silence, Floyd added, "Got a hunch I know at least some of what's on your mind. When we were down at the stomp grounds last night, one of the men said that Skeeter was going around town saying you tried to gun down his daddy. We all figured it was just Skeeter being Skeeter."

Tom sighed heavily. "Well, at least this time, there's a germ of truth in what he said. Yesterday one of the prisoners, the one they call Tough Tony, just walked right out of camp. He didn't really try to escape, but we're going to have to put him in jail anyway, which means we have to build a jail cell somewhere. I don't get it, Floyd. The dumbbell went over to Mary Cox's farm to serenade her. By the time Mary had called around looking for me to come pick him up, Hamby and a gang of other men were out at Mary's farm. Hamby had a rope. It was a lynch mob, Floyd, pure and simple. I had to protect my prisoner, and I did."

He picked up a pebble and tossed it angrily down the road. "But then I did something stupid. After all these months locking horns with Hamby, when I saw him leading that mob, I just blew my top. I'm afraid I became as big a bully as I've accused Hamby of being. I didn't draw my weapon, but I had my hand on it. When we were taking the prisoner back into custody, I told Hamby that if he tried to stop me, I'd shoot him in the foot." He shrugged. "I might have said big toe. I was trying to be threatening and funny at the same time. Didn't work. Hamby was wrong, dead wrong—but I was wrong, too. And I've learned that two wrongs may not make a right, but they can make an excuse—at least for the guy who does the first wrong. Then he can say you're just as bad." He sighed deeply. "I better go patch things up with Hamby, and Skeeter, too, I guess, although my heart's just not in it."

"Don't get down on yourself too bad, Lieutenant," Floyd said. "Talking to old man Hamby won't hurt, I suppose, but there isn't a patch big enough for the hole in that kid's heart. He just isn't wired up like the rest of us. Know what else he said? He said it would have served those chicken-shits right if you had shot them. This is his father he's talking about, mind you. He said that if he ever catches one of those dago bastards outside the barbed wire, he'll string 'em up first and ask questions later. Don't waste your breath on him, Lieutenant."

"Won't be able to avoid it," Tom replied. "He's my starting half-back. But thanks for the warning."



They slid into their usual booth at the café.

"Oh, hell, this is all I needed," Tom said, ducking his head slightly. "Look who's headed this way."

Joseph Atubby and his hulking son Joe walked slowly up to the booth. Joseph had already removed his hat, and was kneading it in obvious embarrassment.

"Morning, Lieutenant; morning Floyd," Joseph said in a low voice. "I was hoping I might catch you here, sir. I want you to know something, and I'll say it right here in front of my boy. I acted like an idiot out there yesterday." Tom raised his eyebrows in surprise, but let Mr. Atubby continue. "I'm mighty sorry. I don't know what got into us. Mister Hamby's been telling everybody that those Italians were going to break out of there sooner or later, and we were going to have to take matters into our own hands. So when he told us there were prisoners out at the Cox place—'crawling with prisoners' I think he said—we just lost our heads. I'll say it again. I'm sorry, sir. I'd like to make it up to you, if I can."

"Mister Atubby, it takes a brave man to admit his mistakes. I'm still learning that myself," Tom said. "And I thank you. Having prisoners of war in the middle of Indian Territory is new for everybody, me included, and we're bound to stumble now and then." He looked to Joe. "Son, you can learn a lot from your father today. My football coach in college used to tell us, 'It isn't what you do; it's what you do next that counts.'" Tom appeared to mull something over for a moment. But come to think of it, Mister Atubby, you sure could help me out. I'm looking for an assistant coach. Any ideas?"

"Shoot, yes," said a relieved Atubby. "Me. I was a pretty good defensive end once upon a time and I used to be able to drop-kick a pecan through a knothole, if I do say so." He smiled broadly. "Count me in, Lieutenant. See you at practice. C'mon, son, let's leave the men in peace."

As Tom and Floyd watched the Atubby men leave, Dora Clark placed two plates of sausage gravy and biscuits in front of them. "Eat up, fellas, it's on the house. I've got a little 'I'm sorrying' to do myself."

"Well," Floyd said, shaking his head, "I'd like to apologize to both of you for being so very nearly perfect that I don't have anything to be sorry about. It's an affliction. You got any sugar back there you hide away for the paying customers?"



When Tom and Floyd walked into the camp headquarters, Jesse Hare was looking at blueprints. The ever-present cigarette was hanging from his lips. Vito D'Amico was sitting in a straight chair in the corner, honking miserably on a tenor saxophone. He took the horn from his mouth when he saw Tom.

"Hail da conquering hero, *Tenente*," he said in his best Brooklyn twang.

"Hi, Lieutenant," Hare said. He took the cigarette out of his mouth and actually shook Tom's hand. "Damn fine job out there yesterday. You probably saved that lummo's life. So now I'm trying to figure out a place for our wandering troubadour to cool his heels. Corporal Muñoz tells me Aranetto is ready to pay his debt to society. For now we've got him stashed away in one of the private rooms in the infirmary."

"And let me tell you, Lieutenant Gregory," Vito interjected, "if the soldiers are proud of you, the prisoners are just plain nuts. They think you hung the moon, saving Antonio's life like that. As far as they're concerned, you could run for president of Italy and win in a landslide."

"I'd rather kiss a pig," Tom said, "but thanks, both of you. I think eight days shut up in the infirmary should settle our wandering troubadour. Where'd you get the saxophone, Vito? I didn't know you could play."

"I can't. That's why they banished me from band practice until I can stop sounding like a ruptured duck," Vito answered, the sax dangling from his neck.

"Colorful phraseology, Mister D'Amico. When this war is over, whoever had you as an English teacher is going to go home sounding like one of the Dead End Kids," Tom said. "May I?" He unhooked the sax from Vito's neck strap, put the horn to his lips and played eight credible bars of "In the Mood." He even gave it his old Lake Erie dance band swing to the ceiling at the end.

"Not bad, Lieutenant," said Vito. "You're no Sergio Barbieri, but if you'd like a spot in the band, I could ask around." He grinned and added, "I know people."

"So the Chigger Lake Men's Chorus wasn't enough, now you've got a band? And who in the hell is this Sergio Barbieri?"

Pete Patterson, having come in without a word of greeting, sat down behind Tom's desk.



"Don't stand on formality," Tom said grumpily. "Make yourself comfortable."

"I'll ignore the sarcasm," Pete said, "because I know deep down in your heart you look up to me. I'm like the big brother you never had, the one who was supposed to beat you up and make you humble. And now I'm too old and you're a gentleman by act of Congress. Besides, as I saw yesterday, you pack a shootin' iron. Sergio Barbieri is a professional musician from Foxtrot barracks. He thought he was joining the Army to play in *Il Duce's* personal dance orchestra. Fooled him. He's from Rome, says he used to play in the Casa Loma All-Stars."

Floyd asked in surprise, "Glen Gray's Casa Loma Orchestra?"

"No, Casa Loma Roma, but he's real good. There are four or five of them who are pretty good, and they sound okay, especially since they don't have any music. Murray has written out some songs for them, but Aldo insists on leading them, and his idea of swing is Nelson Eddy and Jeanette McDonald. Got to admit he sounds great on the love songs, though."

"Yeah, but we want them to learn how to play the boogie-woogie, so's we can learn to jitterbug," Vito said. "Pete's promised to teach us, and he told us that if we would mind our P's and Q's, he might talk some of the Italian girls from his town to come over for a dance. Right, Pete?"

"That's right, Tom," Pete said to an obviously skeptical Tom Gregory. "Some of the gals are willing to come over, and we could recruit Mary Beth, and Connie—maybe even Oklahoma Garland, Vito," he said, moving his eyebrows up and down like Groucho. "From what I saw yesterday, we might even see Mary Cox when her new boyfriend gets out of the pokey. Now I see you're still mulling this over, Tom, but my thinking is this: now that you've shown the men that you are willing to punish them when they are bad, wouldn't it be a good idea to dangle a reward in front of them if they're good?"

"I don't know," Tom said. "There are plenty of folks who think this place is already a country club without me putting on a cotillion. I'll think about it. In the meantime, Floyd, let's go see about our prison inside a prison. At the least, I want a padlock on his door. If he gets out again, I swear...."

"You could break his big old heart by taking away his peach-picking privileges and jitterbug lessons," Vito said. "And no offense, *Tenente*—because you're treating us fair and square, everybody agrees

on that—but this is our barbed wire country club, sir. It's our Elba. We eat well, but only when we are told to eat; we sleep well, but someone else decides when the lights go out. We smoke our free cigarettes seven thousand miles away from old friends and family. We miss our little children. We miss our dreams. And we know that Italy can never defeat this mighty nation. We knew this before we ever raised our hands in surrender in North Africa. So we gaze at the concertina wire, prisoners in paradise, hoping that America will crush our country, our *patria*, quickly so we can go home again. And we sing '*Va, pensiero*' as we look at the wire, urging our souls to take flight." He looked around all of a sudden, stunned to realize he had tears in his eyes. "I'm sorry. I had no idea that was bottled up down there." He laughed hurriedly. "Well, beggars can't be choosers, as they say in Flatbush. But we would like to jitterbug."

"I'll think about it," Tom said, a little surprised and disappointed at how much like his father he sounded.



It was late afternoon, and Floyd and Murray Lipton sat quietly on the floating dock of Chigger Lake. They were fishing as usual, but their minds were on other things as they killed time until the Green Corn Ceremony later that day.

Floyd gave his plug a lengthy final cast, and slowly began reeling it in. "Kinda sorry that the Lieutenant and Miss Ballard can't come to the Green Corn Ceremonies. You still coming with me, aren't you? You haven't changed your mind?"

"I'm ready. Kind of scared, but ready," Murray said as he laid his fishing pole aside. "I couldn't sleep last night thinking about it. You sure you want me to come? I don't want to embarrass you."

"Oh hell, son, you won't. You just watch what I do and do the same thing, you'll be fine. We'll be doing the Buffalo Dance, it's the one where the whole tribe, men and women, join in. Even some of the youngsters. We call 'em dances, but there aren't any steps like in white dances. Mostly it's just moving, keeping your body going to the rhythm." He stood. "Come on up to the car. I've got a little something for you."

When they got to the Pontiac with the fishing rod antenna, Floyd laid their poles down in the back seat, then led Murray around behind the car. He opened the trunk and took out a small bundle wrapped in paper and string. "Got you something to wear for the dance," he said brusquely. "Try it on while I'm putting on my stuff."

Murray opened the package to find one of the traditional Creek long shirts and a belt made of tooled silver discs. The white cotton shirt was festooned with red, green and black ribbons that ran from each shoulder

to the hem. When he slipped the shirt on and fastened the belt, the shirt hit him just above the knees.

"It's real good looking, Floyd, and feels great, too." Murray hesitated. "Um, is it supposed to be this long?"

Floyd laughed as he sat on the back bumper, tying turtle shell rattles around his knees. "That's why we call it a long shirt, I reckon. We had to keep them long in the old days, because my ancestors didn't wear pants underneath there, just leggings and loincloths. *You* can keep your pants on, though. Modern times." He stood and walked a few paces back and forth, satisfied with the maracas-like sound of the rattle and the tiny tinkle of a sleigh bell sewn onto the leather knee strap. "C'mon," he said. "We better make tracks. We can talk as we go."

"We're going to walk? What's the matter with your car?" Murray asked. "I don't want to get tired out before I even get there."

"No cars allowed at the stomp grounds, I'm afraid. Might as well just leave it here, it's only a couple of miles, just about the right distance to stretch our legs." Floyd closed the trunk. "Besides, walking to the Green Corn Town is part of the whole deal. Close your eyes for a second. Hear anything?"

"Just the katydids and some birds. Am I supposed to be hearing something else?"

"Are you sure those are birds?" Floyd cupped a hand to his mouth and gave a call like a blue jay. Immediately there was a blue jay response from farther down the lake shore. Then another farther still. "Now open your eyes and look real good. See anybody?"

"No, but I got a feeling that's the wrong answer."

"Don't beat yourself up," Floyd said. "If I was in New York I probably couldn't spot a taxicab if it was bearing down on me. It's all about what you're used to. But yeah, those scrub oaks over there are probably teeming with Indians, or soon will be. I can't see them yet either, but I know they are there, and it makes me happy. Coming together like this, even if it's only once a year, reminds us that we are not alone, that we are a strong and forgiving family. We speak as one, we think as one. We do the same dances as our grandparents and their grandparents did. We do everything exactly the same as we have done for a thousand years—the Arbor Dance, the Ribbon Dance, the Hunter Dance, the Buffalo Dance—and we dance with our ancestors as well as each other." He chuckled. "Listen again. Are you sure those are katydids?"

They walked for a while in silence, the only sound the swishing of the pebbles in Floyd's legging shells and the little bells that somehow sounded far away.

Finally Murray stopped in his tracks and broke the reverie. "If everybody's going to be talking in Indian, how in the world am I going to know what to do? Maybe I shouldn't go. I don't want to screw this up for you."

"You couldn't if you tried," Floyd said gently. "Just for the record, we won't be talking Indian, we'll be talking Creek. But don't be afraid. It'll come easy to you. We've already talked about some of this stuff and you are going to know some of the people there, too. Mister Carter? I already told you he's one of our chiefs, what we call the *micco*. He's in charge of the ceremonies and he knows you're coming, so he'll shoo you back in line if you stray too far. And three or four of the gals who come out to the camp to teach English will be there, too. And the Brainard brothers. You've met them, right? And Oklahoma Garland, of course."

"Miss Garland is going to be there? I didn't know she was Creek."

"She isn't, she's Choctaw, but she's important to us and we love her like a sister. She and Dale have been coming to the dances for years. Oklahoma probably knows more about the Creek people than ninety percent of us Creeks. She's a real scholar, that woman. If she dances tonight, you just watch her. Between the two of us, we won't steer you wrong."

"Will you teach me about the Green Corn Ceremonies?"

There was a sound of a meadow lark to their right, and a family of six people emerged from the brush onto the road, waved at Floyd and started walking in the same direction. "That's Bobby Ray Watko and his family. They're Raccoon Clan. He's a cousin of mine. He and his missus don't speak English very good, but the kids do, of course."

Floyd put his hand on Murray's shoulder as they continued walking. "Okay, you want to learn. Let's start with your shirt and the number four. The number four, what we call *osten*, is very important to us. Not only does it represent the four directions and the four seasons, it reminds us of the four seasons of man, and lots more."

Murray looked down at the front of his shirt. "Does my shirt have something to do with the number four?" he asked.

"Uh-huh, it's the ribbons. Every season of life has its own color to us Creeks." Floyd pointed to the ribbons running down the shirt. "White,

the color of your shirt, stands for purity and being innocent like a baby. That red ribbon stands for the sun and our youth, when we are brave and full of blood. The green one is for the harvest, when we have matured. And the black one is for the end of life. My wife made that shirt for me, son, years ago when I was skinny. I haven't been able to get into it since I don't know how long, so you're welcome to it."

Murray stopped and looked at Floyd in amazement. "Your wife? I didn't know you were married."

"*Was* married, Murray. She passed on about ten years ago now. You would have liked her. She was such a cutie pie. Her name was Talks Like Rain 'cause she did, kinda soft and whispery. She died of the measles—probably got them from me. I was working in the oil fields in those days, and used to bring home every disease known to man." Floyd looked off into the distance behind his friend. "It's funny. We think of ourselves as strong, but we sure can't stand up to white man diseases. Measles kill us, the flu kills us, mumps kill us, chicken pox kills us. It's a wonder there's any of us left at all, I guess." He turned to go back down the road. "*Osten* is part of dying, too. When one of us dies, the family sits with the body four days and nights." He brightened. "Now let's hurry on to the stomp grounds. There's a barbeque before the Buffalo Dance, and I want to get there before it's all gone. Most of the men have been fasting and drinking the black medicine all day, and they're bound to be powerful hungry." He laughed. "They drink it four times."

They were joined by more and more people walking from every direction, and the laughter, rattles and bells created an ancient music to Murray's ears. It was all accompanied by the soft shuffling rhythm of hundreds of moccasins on gravel and clay.

A faint yellow haze began to settle over everyone as they dropped into the little valley that contained the stick ball field, picnic grounds and Green Corn Town—or stomp grounds—with its brush arbors, lean-tos and roaring ceremonial fire that was two days old now and tall as a man. On the edge of the stomp grounds were long tables made of one-by-twelve boards on saw horses. The tables were groaning with barbeque beef and pork, fried chicken, fry bread, sweet potatoes, watermelon, and corn served in every way imaginable. Families were scattered everywhere eating, some in folding chairs, but most on blankets or just sitting on the grass. Kids ran loose, as they do at picnics all over the world, and some of the older folks were grabbing quick naps in order to be fresh for the Buffalo Dance later.

Oklahoma Garland was standing with Ed Carter and one of her volunteer tutors, Fern Wickers, when she caught sight of the two men approaching.

"*Hosci*, Floyd! *Hosci*, Murray," she shouted and waved them forward. The greeting sounded like "Ho-shee" to Murray.

"What, you were worried they would run out of food?" Murray said in awe.

"Nah, it was just a way to hurry you along." Floyd nodded respectfully to Ed Carter. "*Hosci*, *Micco*. *Hosci*, Oklahoma. We're famished. Have you eaten yet?"

"I'm still working on this *sofki*," Ed said, motioning to his small bowl of sour corn gruel that was the staple drink at Creek events like this. "But eat up, boys. I got to go round up my Stick Men. We're about to make our first call for the Buffalo Dance, so you've still got plenty of time."

"Let me guess," Murray said, preparing to attack a drumstick. "You call us four times."

Ed Carter cocked an eyebrow. "Not bad, soldier boy, not bad. You've been studying up, I see."

Just then Murray felt a tug on his long shirt. He spun around, not seeing and almost upending the little girl who hung to his shirt for dear life. "Hello?"

The little girl gave one more tug to make sure she had Murray's attention. "Excuse me, Mister. Are you the soldier who plays the piano? I'm Maggie Wickers. That's my mom over there. We just got my grandma's old piano, but nobody knows how to play it. My mom says you are the best piano player she ever heard." So far she had made the entire speech on one breath. Now she inhaled noisily. "Anyway, would you give me lessons? I could pay you, maybe."

Fern Wickers hurried over red-faced, followed by a laughing Oklahoma Garland. "Margaret Mary Wickers, what has gotten into you, girl? I'm sorry, sir, she didn't mean to bother you."

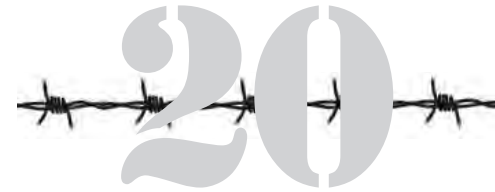
Murray smiled and took the hand of the girl whose face had turned stormy the instant she heard her mother use all three of her names. "It's no bother at all, Mrs. Wickers. Maggie—Margaret Mary—I'd be happy to teach you how to play. And this year only, the lessons are free."

Maggie was now joined by her older brother, Calvin. "If they're free, can you teach me the saxophone? I want to play like Tex Beneke. He's my favorite."

Maggie's mother by this time had given up. She moaned and turned her eyes to the heavens for relief or to be struck dead by lightning, she really didn't care which.

"Don't worry, Ma'am. Son, I can't play it, but I sure do know someone who can. He may be as good as Tex Beneke, and he's free, too. I'll just have to check with the camp commander."

Oklahoma gently pushed the children toward their still-mortified mother. "Now get along, young ones. We'll work all this out next week." She turned to Murray. "That was a nice thing you did," she said. "And it gives me a whale of an idea, if you and Tom are agreeable." They heard the warbling diphthong call of the Stick Men. "Now grab another piece of chicken and come with me to the ball pole. We got a long night of dancing ahead of us."



When Tom Gregory opened the front door of the Weleetka *American*, he was met with Vivaldi, the earthy musk of the print shop, and the unmistakable fragrance of Connie Ballard.

Connie and Oklahoma Garland were hunched over some papers at Oklahoma's desk when they heard the little bell over the door. Connie rushed out of the office and gave Tom a hug.

"Hi there, tall, dark and absent. I haven't seen you in days," she said. "When I got back from that German camp in Okmulgee, you were already gone. I missed you."

Tom took her face in both hands, trying to decide which eye was more beautiful. "This will have to do until I can get you alone," he whispered hoarsely, their lips almost touching. Then, glancing over Connie's shoulder, he saw Oklahoma Garland, arms folded, leaning against the door jamb, her expression the amused reproach Tom remembered from his favorite nun in high school. "Hi, Oklahoma. I got a message you wanted to see me. What's up?" As he moved toward the newspaper's little glass office, he heard Connie whisper back, "Promises, promises."

"Good morning, Tom. Thanks for coming. I join my roommate Connie in welcoming you back. But if you don't mind, I'll save my lascivious hug for later." She paused and grinned. "Oh, that's wonderful; Connie, you were right. He just about blushes on command, doesn't he?" Without pausing she asked Tom, "Where've you been?"

"I've been soldiering alone at Camp Gruber, trying single-handedly to save the Allied Forces from an uncertain future, and this is the greeting I get? What you call blushing is merely blood rushing to my brain, a common affliction among highly intelligent people."

"See, I told you," Connie laughed. "He's also a natural-born liar. I'm putting in the papers to make you an official Okie. What were you doing at Gruber, darlin'?"

Tom was aware that by dropping the *G*, Connie had purposely defused the word "darling," but he blushed again anyway. "Actually, I was up with Major Appleton and some of the Gruber brass discussing the P.O.W. situation. They've got another bunch of prisoners, maybe a hundred or so, coming into New York for us in a few weeks, but this may be the last batch. Looks like we're winning the war in Italy, thank goodness. And when we do, the thinking is we can't send the entire Italian army back here, so we'll probably just leave them in place."

"What would happen to the prisoners already here if Italy surrenders?" Oklahoma asked, too casually.

Tom smiled. "You mean prisoners like Vito D'Amico? They're talking about what to do with them this very minute in Washington, I understand. Well, well, whose turn is it to blush now?" He turned to Connie. "What about you, Lieutenant? It's all the rage. Anything you want to blush about?"

"No, darn it. But a girl has dreams." Connie grew serious. "So, are you headed to New York again?"

"No. Believe it or not, I promised Ed Carter that I'd coach the high school football team, and the season starts in three weeks. If the regular season goes anything like the first practice, Weleetka is in for a long winter. I'm sending Rob and Corporal Muñoz to New York instead. Victor speaks Italian like a native now. And I'm going to send Private Lipton, too, so he can visit his folks. He's earned it."

"I hope he doesn't have to leave before the watermelon festival Saturday," Oklahoma said. "He's a big part of the festivities and the main reason I wanted to talk with you. He and I came up with an idea to improve relations between the town and the camp."

The three of them gathered around Oklahoma's desk. "Mind if I help myself to the coffee?" A regular at the newspaper by this time, Tom even had his own coffee mug, which he promptly filled. "Don't worry about the festival. You know I'd never disappoint you like that, or the men at camp, for that matter. Lipton and Mister Pensotti have been knocking themselves out rehearsing the men's chorus and they sound absolutely magnificent, as far as I'm concerned. You'd know more about that than I would, of course, but they just seem to get better and better

every day. There are twenty of them in the chorus now. Did you know they even have a song where all they do is hum? Vito said they might as well sing something where everybody starts off on the same foot."

Oklahoma chuckled. "Vito is so funny. It's actually called 'The Humming Song.' It's from *Madame Butterfly*. And I've heard the men a few times myself. Their 'Soldiers' Chorus' is a thing of beauty. So do you want to hear my idea?"

"Shoot."

"Well, some of the gals in my book brigade have been talking about asking Murray if he'd give their kids piano lessons, but they were kind of afraid to ask you. Then the other night at the stomp dance, little Maggie Wickers just blurted out she wanted him to teach her, and before poor old Fern could stop it, Maggie's brother Calvin said he wanted lessons, too—saxophone lessons. By the end of the night, we must have had six families asking for music lessons. Tom, we're starved for music for our children. Our last music teacher joined the Waves and went to Virginia to be closer to her husband. That was a year ago, and Ed Carter hasn't had a sniff of finding a new teacher of any kind, much less music. Murray told me that he'd be more than willing. He told me that there were some fine musicians among the prisoners, and they've even formed a dance band...."

Tom set his mug down on the desk. "I don't mean to interrupt, Oklahoma, but if this is about the prisoners holding a jitterbug dance, the answer is going to be no, at least not yet, regardless of what Pete says. I'm staking my reputation, and probably my commission, on just bringing the men's chorus to the watermelon festival. One step at a time. I sure can't handle civilians, especially good looking young women, running all over Camp Chigger Lake."

"Now hold your horses, my Knight of the Vermillion Countenance," Oklahoma pled. When she saw his puzzled look, she took his hand and smiled broadly. "That's Cervantes, Tom, *Man of La Mancha*. It's required reading in second-year Spanish in college. No, what I'm wondering is would you allow some of the best-behaved prisoners—Aldo Pensotti, Vito, that saxophone player Murray told me about, what's his name, Barbieri, and some others—to teach our children music? That's what Connie and I were doing when you came in, making up a list of kids who want music lessons and matching them up with the prisoners."

"I don't know. I can't have children at the camp, either. These are prisoners of war, after all, and who knows what kind of men I'll have on my hands when the new group shows up? Just too risky."

Oklahoma took Tom's hands in hers, patting them one instant, tugging on them the next. "Connie and I thought of that. They wouldn't have to come to the camp. We could have the lessons in the afternoons at the V.F.W. hall. It's just a block from school and there are already soldiers there. Most of the baking and canning is finished by that time, right, Connie?"

Connie playfully plucked Tom's sleeve. "All wrapped up. The bakers have all gone home, and Murray tells me that all of his work is finished by that time, too. You've got a gold mine of talent in that camp, Tom—voice, piano, violin, cornet, clarinet, saxophone—I'll show you the list. What do you say?"

After a moment Tom nodded his assent. He gave Oklahoma's hands a reassuring pat. "I say yes. It's a great idea. And I wasn't struggling with *Man of La Mancha*. Everybody knows about him. I was struggling with 'vermillion.' Does that mean red?"

Saturday mornings were the time when poverty crept back into Weleetka. This was when the farmers and sharecroppers came into town in their rusting pickups—"khaki men with Southwest faces and rich slow tongues," as poet Wilma McDaniel described them—some to sell, some to buy grain and flour in fifty-pound sacks that would soon become dresses, and some just to look and enjoy the human contact ... and maybe a bowl of chili at Mrs. Clark's.

But not this Saturday. This was the annual watermelon festival, Mrs. Clark's was closed, and chili was on the house, courtesy of the Okfuskee County Fire Department Engine Company Number Two. One of the most anticipated events of the watermelon festival, the chili cook-off had been sponsored by the firemen (all three of them) for ten years now and competition was stiff. Mrs. Evans had won the first couple of years, but after she came back from a vacation in New Orleans, she started putting okra in hers, calling it 'chili gumbo,' and lost her advantage. Ham Hamby was an early favorite, but he kept adding cayenne to his batches until the women and children wouldn't touch it, and most of the men only tasted it on a dare. "Bunch of sissies," Hamby grumbled loudly

as he lost year after year, and started suggesting that the judging was rigged.

The current favorite was concocted by the bachelor pharmacist Elton Gaston, although there were some like Floyd Breedlove who thought that the large amount of beans in Gaston's chili was scant compensation for his apparent aversion to beef. "I swear I saw Mister Gaston buying ten pounds of hamburger meat at the Brainards' the other day. Do you know what ten pounds of hamburger means to that man? One thousand bowls of chili."

Most of the festival was held on the high school football field because it had bleachers for the old folks, a rudimentary public address system, and huge R.C. Cola ice boxes that were now filled with ice to keep the watermelon sherbet from melting. Joseph Atubby and his son Joe, who Tom had discovered everybody called Big Boy, won the three-legged race, and young Big Boy scored again later by winning the watermelon eating contest hands down. The greased watermelon race, with its prize of an enormous apple pie that Connie had asked Ennio Venturini and his bakers to make special, was won by a Wetumka man whom nobody seemed to know. While Ed Carter and the other town councilmen were discussing if this was entirely legal, the foreigner took his pie, got in his car and drove away.

By late afternoon everybody moved into the high school auditorium for the awarding of prizes and ribbons. The auditorium was again set up theater-style and it quickly filled with town officials, ribbon winners and their families, and curious Weleetkans. The room was buzzing with one of the worst-kept secrets in the tiny town's recent memory—that the Italian prisoners were coming to sing.

Tom, Rob Luke and Jesse Hare had agreed that they would be all spit and polish, wear their side arms, and march the prisoners in and out with a minimum of fuss. Aldo Pensotti had promised that the men would say absolutely nothing, simply walk in with their eyes down, present their program and walk out again. Tom had told Vito and Aldo about the incident of the P.O.W. giving the finger to the guards on the Queen Mary. "Please tell the men that if anything even remotely like that happens at the festival, it will be their last trip into town as well as their first."

Mayor Ed Carter welcomed everyone, then asked Oklahoma Garland to sing "America the Beautiful," which she did after introducing Private Murray Lipton as her accompanist. She was followed by William Brainard, who made his annual *basso profundo* rendition of

“Asleep in the Deep.” Everyone agreed that with Lipton’s backing on the piano, Brainard had seldom sounded better.

Then precisely at four in the afternoon, the auditorium double doors opened. Led by Tom and flanked by Rob and Jesse, the Camp Chigger Lake prisoners of war filed quietly into the now equally quiet hall. They took their place on the small risers to stand in two rows beside the piano, just as they had practiced at the camp. Then, also as they practiced, with a nod from *Il Maestro*, they removed their prison caps and clutched them in front of their chests like schoolboys.

Seeing all the men in one place had a sobering effect on the audience. The men looked every inch the prisoners, in their chain-gang denims with the letters P and W painted on their pant legs. They seemed smaller somehow, more vulnerable. Those in the audience who had come expecting, perhaps hoping, to see the tough, grizzled faces of the enemy were soon disappointed. Some of the freshly-scrubbed young men, such as the tenor Angelo Festa, looked like altar boys, not soldiers.

Tom stepped in front of the singers. “Ladies and gentlemen, as most of you know, I am Lieutenant Tom Gregory. It is my honor and duty to command the United States Army Twenty-Fourth Prisoner of War Service Unit at Weleetka, Oklahoma; what has come to be known as Camp Chigger Lake. I’d like to introduce my executive officer, Lieutenant Rob Luke, and the camp’s non-commissioned officer in charge, Staff Sergeant Jesse Hare. On behalf of the rest of the Army personnel at the camp, and the Italian prisoners of war residing in the camp, I’d like to thank Okfuskee County commissioner and Weleetka *American* editor and publisher Oklahoma Garland for providing the men this opportunity to entertain for you.

“As those of you who have been to Pete Patterson’s restaurant in Krebs know, opera is to Italians what Irving Berlin is to me. You have already heard the accomplished piano playing of Private Murray Lipton.” Tom waved his arm toward Lipton in recognition, who bowed while seated at the piano. “It was through Private Lipton that we discovered a wealth of singing talent right here among the prisoners. When Oklahoma Garland, who is herself a recognized opera talent, heard some of the men, she asked if they would sing for you today. That was the idea behind the group now standing before you. Ladies and gentlemen, under the direction of concertmaster Aldo Pensotti, I present the Camp Chigger Lake Men’s Chorus.”

Pensotti took his place before the men, bowed stiffly, and nodded to Lipton. Connie had suggested that they might want to ease the audience into opera with something familiar at first, so they led off with “Anvil Chorus” and the Toreador song from *Carmen*. Then true to his altar boy demeanor, Angelo Festa sang “*Ave Maria*” as a solo. This was followed by the piece that had started the whole thing, “*Va, pensiero*.” Then Vito stepped out of the second row and with only the hint of a wink toward Oklahoma Garland, began singing in perfect English, “There’s a bright golden haze on the meadow, there’s a bright golden haze...” Every trace of his Brooklyn accent had disappeared. The applause, which had been building steadily with each number, now rained down on Vito. The audience was startled to hear Vito’s rich baritone singing not only in English, but a song currently popular on radios all across America.

Pensotti got the audience under control again with “The Humming Song” and “Soldier’s Chorus,” then turned, stepped forward and spoke to the audience for the first time.

“Mayor Edward Carter, Commissioner Oklahoma Garland, Lieutenant Thomas Gregory and the ladies and gentlemen of the city of Weleetka, Oklahoma,” Pensotti spoke in his stilted, yet authoritative, English, “We, the men of Camp Chigger Lake, are honored to perform for you today in this festival of the watermelons. In the short months since we are arrived in your country, we see and feel your many kindnesses. You treat us well, and when this war is at last finished, we will always remember you with distinction. Now, with the assistance of Mister Lipton, we have made a surprise as our thank you. Mister Lipton?”

Murray played a four bar intro, and then loudly struck the now-familiar ascending octave scale. Glancing back and forth among themselves in obvious pleasure and anticipation, the men began, “Oooklahoma, where the wind comes sweeping down the plain...”



A somber Tom Gregory sat on the first row of Spencer Stadium watching the gathering darkness. A canvas bag of footballs was at his feet.

Spencer Stadium, which was to stadiums what Big River was to rivers, consisted of ten rows of concrete bleachers built by the W.P.A. in 1934. It was named for Cletus “Cactus” Spencer, the long-time coach of the Outlaws. Cactus Spencer had been the only winning coach in Weleetka High School history, and after this afternoon, it was clear to Tom that he would never enter that pantheon.

Connie Ballard sat beside him and draped her arm tenderly over his shoulder. “Cheer up, Tom. It’s only the first game of the season. Some of your boys looked darned good out there this afternoon. Skeeter ran for a touchdown, didn’t he? Besides, those boys from Okemah are rough as a cob. Everybody says that.”

Tom idly kicked at the bag of footballs. “Actually, Okemah was supposed to be one of the teams we could beat. When I was in Muskogee last week, I watched a Rough Riders practice. Those guys looked like collegians. And we play them in three weeks. At least it’s an away game, so the folks here won’t have to watch it.” He shook his head. “Thirty-four to seven, Connie, and honestly, it didn’t feel that close. Skeeter’s greased lightning, that’s for sure, but he fumbled twice and got two unsportsmanlike conduct penalties. Should have been at least three. What am I going to do with that guy? I caught him and the twins smoking cigarettes after practice Thursday. Did I tell you that?”

“Nope. That’s not so good, huh? When I went to Classen High School in Oklahoma City, four starters my senior year got caught smoking and the coach kicked them off the team. We weren’t a very good team to

begin with and that sealed the deal. Lost all the rest of the games. Are you going to throw Skeeter off?"

"I thought a lot about it and no, I don't think I will. It wouldn't be fair to the other players. Besides, I've never been a big believer in what my priest used to call *in loco parentis*, usually just before he smacked me. Especially not with this loco and his parent. One more run-in with Hamby would just about cook my goose."

He pulled a football out of the bag and started tossing it back and forth. "Maybe I'm just trying to avoid a fight, but I think most of the rules coaches make up are just bullshit anyway, just men playing God and getting away with it. My coach at Thiel had a thousand rules—no drinking, no smoking, those make sense—but no chewing gum, for cripes sakes, no moustaches, no white socks, always wear a tie on the team bus. Our favorite rule was no sex forty-eight hours before the game. We loved repeating this rule to each other and pretending it was the most difficult one to keep, but believe me, outside of Conrad Kerley, who was already secretly married, that rule was as much theoretical as it was nonsense."

"You got the nonsense part right, take it from a nurse," Connie said, keeping her arm on his shoulder. "I heard that Babe Ruth had a rule of no sex or hot dogs between innings, but he didn't always keep it, especially if it was a double-header. What do you say I stake us to an ice cream at Owl Drugs and then the picture show? It's *Bambi*, the perfect date movie." She snuggled up close and dropped her hand around his neck and onto his chest. "To cheer you up, we can sit in the back and you can put your arm around my shoulder like this, and while you're pretending to look at Thumper, casually lower your hand until you feel my boob. Won't that be fun?"

"Well, I don't know," Tom said, learning how to play Connie's game and loving it. "Only if you promise to sit like a block of ice, stare straight ahead at the screen and pretend you have no idea what I'm doing."

"You drive a hard bargain, Lieutenant. Done."

Sergeant Hare was busy tearing the cellophane off his umpteenth pack of Lucky Strike Greens when Tom walked into the administration building. "Hey, Lieutenant. Got a telegram from Lieutenant Luke. They're on their way home with a hundred and twenty more prisoners.

Should be pulling in sometime tomorrow. I got some of the men sweeping out the barracks in C wing. Amazing how much dust piles up out here in only a couple of months."

"Thanks, Jesse. You still smoking those things? I thought they'd be stale by now."

"No, hell, they last forever. I heard a few years ago they found some cartons of Picayunes just where Admiral Byrd had left them in the Antarctic. Ten years later and they were still fresh as a daisy. Besides," he looked thoughtfully at the now-open pack, "they have the advantage of being free and ... and in long supply. Do you say that? You say short supply, so what's the opposite?"

"How should I know? Damn, Jesse, you're starting to sound like Lipton. Maybe we ought to put you on *Doctor I.Q.* Did Rob say anything about the prisoners I should know?"

"Just that they look better-fed than the last bunch. Oh, and apparently we got a soccer hero coming our way." He leafed through some papers. "Name's Gino Ballotti. Lieutenant Luke said one of the New York Italian newspapers wanted to interview him. The Army said, 'Nuts.'"

"Believe it or not, I think I've heard of him. My grandfather is a huge soccer fan, especially Italian League, and I'm pretty sure he mentioned that name. I don't know much about the guy, but I know he didn't play for Torino. If you didn't play for Torino, Grandpa Gregorio considered you the enemy." Tom jerked his thumb toward the door. "Let's walk up to the barracks. I want to see what shape the ones we have are in. Maybe we can stop off at the soccer field and find out something about our new star."

They arrived at the dusty field to find a game in full swing. Floyd was there, working on one of the spigots they used to water the field, although by September live grass in Oklahoma was pretty much a memory. Tom noticed that just outside the fence was a sizable group of Indian men watching the match, some in folding chairs, others standing quietly.

"Hello, Floyd," Tom said. "Getting things shipshape for our new prisoners? I understand one of them is a real soccer star." He gestured towards the fence. "Speaking of which, since when have the men been drawing an audience?"

"Oh, they're a bunch of my people from down in Hanna and Dustin. They love watching soccer; they completely get it, say it reminds them of our stickball games." Floyd laughed gently. "They also say it beats

the hell out of white man football where all everybody does is knock the snot out of each other and roll around in the mud. No offense, Lieutenant.”

Tom shrugged. “None taken. If I wasn’t the coach of the Outlaws, I’d probably bring my chair and sit out there with them. There’s Vito.” Tom waved and shouted, “Hey Vito, come here a minute, will you? I want to ask you something.”

Vito had been playing on the far wing, so as he trotted over to Tom, the game momentarily dissolved. He drew most of the other curious players with him. “Good morning, *Tenente*, what’s up?”

“You guys are going to have company, maybe as early as tomorrow. Some more of your fellow soldiers are coming in. Got captured in Anzio, I understand.

“Dang. We knew we were fixing those barracks up for somebody.” Vito smiled. “We were hoping it might be German nurses.”

“Bet you were, at that,” Tom said. “It’s been a long, hot summer. But those German girls can’t jitterbug, and I hear they sweat a lot. No nurses, but maybe a soccer star.” He looked down at the clipboard Jesse had given him. “Ever hear of a guy named Ballotti?”

D’Amico’s eyes widened. “*Gino* Ballotti? Well, I guess so. You ever hear of Ted Williams? Listen to this.” He turned and shouted to the men gathering around them. “*Che e’ il midfielder piu’ grande in Italia?*”

Instantly the men shouted back, “Ballotti!” Then, laughing, they began a practiced low chant, pumping their clenched fists at waist level. “Ballotti...Ballotti...Ballotti...”

“That’s the way the crowds would urge him on during corner kicks, Lieutenant. He’s amazing. We heard he’d been drafted, of course, but not captured. And he’s coming here? Gino Ballotti? Mussolini must be delighted.”

Tom looked perplexed. “That’s a heck of a strange thing to say. Why would Mussolini want his favorite soccer player to get captured by the Allies?”

“Because Ballotti isn’t Mussolini’s favorite soccer player. That little pig-eyed clerk hates Ballotti. That’s probably why he got him drafted and sent to the front. See, Ballotti’s one of our country’s best players all right, played on three world cup teams. But he plays for *Internazionale Milan*, they won the *Copa d’Italia* in ‘38 and ‘39, and *Il Duce* loves A.C. Milan, the team across town. A.C. and *Internazionale* are kind of like the

Dodgers and the Yankees. Care to guess the name of the team Ballotti beat almost single-handed in the ‘41 Cup semi-finals? Don’t waste a guess. Yep, A.C. Milan, and six months later Ballotti was practicing headers in Tobruk. And now he’s here in Oklahoma. All I can say is wow.”

“Wow is right. I had no idea. When he gets here I don’t know whether to put him on kitchen detail or a box of Wheaties.”

“Could you do both? It would cheer the men up.”



Standing on the wooden train platform, Tom and Jesse Hare could feel the first tendrils of autumn swirling around their feet. The prehistoric dangling bolls of the cottonwood trees were exploding, gossamer flurries of seed pods floating everywhere, ignoring gravity. The gnarly sycamores were the first to turn, sending yellow leaves the size of dessert plates bouncing into drifts around the station.

“We used to call this perfect football weather,” Tom said. “Of course, that was back in the days before I was a coach, when I thought of football as a pleasant pastime, not the Ghost of Christmas Future.”

“Don’t be so down in the mouth, Lieutenant. This is pretty much how Knute Rockne started out. I saw that movie. And you’re better looking than Pat O’Brien, leastwise to Lieutenant Ballard. Look on the bright side. The season’s only eight weeks long now. What’s the worst that could happen? They hang you in effigy. Then they hang you for real. Then they cook you in a big pot and eat you. How bad could that be? It isn’t like you get trampled by an elephant or anything.”

“By golly, you’re right, Sergeant. That perks me right up.”

“Let a smile be your umbrella, sir. Don’t look now, but here comes our train.”

The Katy (which is what Oklahomans called the Kansas, Missouri and Texas rail line) pulled in, all squeals and steam. Before it fully shuddered to a stop, Private Murray Lipton jumped down to the platform, clipboard in hand.

“Afternoon, Lieutenant Gregory, Sergeant Hare.” Lipton shook Tom’s outstretched hand. “I bring you greetings from my parents, Lieutenant. My father especially wanted me to ask you if you’ve changed your name back to Gregorio yet. You thinking of doing that?”

"You tell Julius that I am thinking of a name change, but to Lipschitz, so he can adopt me and I can go live in the Dakota. Did you guys get to take in a play when you were in New York?"

Lieutenant Rob Luke descended the steps from the passenger car and stood next to Lipton, whom he slapped on the back. "Better, Tom, better. Lipton's old man got us seventh row center seats at the Radio City Music Hall. Can you believe it? The Rockettes were like right there. What an amazing show. We got to see a brand new movie, too—*The Ox-Bow Incident* with Henry Fonda. Don't worry, it'll probably come to Weleetka sometime next summer. Did you know that Lipton's dad is the lawyer for NBC? We even got a tour of the studio. Didn't see anybody famous, though. At least I don't think we did."

Tom looked over Rob's shoulder to the prisoners still seated in the passenger cars. "Speaking of famous, I understand you've been traveling with a celebrity."

"Oh my God, yes," Rob said. "Corporal Muñoz has been all over him the entire trip. Muñoz speaks Italian like he was born there, and man does he know his soccer. The guy's name is Ballotti. Muñoz told us that half of the people in his home town of San Antonio, the Mexican half, think of this Ballotti as a god and kids put his picture on their bedroom walls. He said the other half of San Antonio, the white half, wouldn't know him from Adam's off ox. Weird, huh? He also said the white kids think Mexican football is for sissies."

"Interesting," Tom said. "It appears we have a touch of the same divide between the white and Indian players on our football team right here. Well, let's get everybody off the train and marched up to camp."

One of the M.P. escorts blew a whistle and another dozen heavily-armed military police appeared, looking ready for battle. Tom had forgotten the no-nonsense M.P.s who had accompanied him only months before. To say that discipline had grown a little lax around Camp Chigger Lake in the interim was an understatement.

They marched the P.O.W.s across the Big River wooden bridge and up the Lake Weleetka gravel road, exactly the same as the last time. But instead of entering an empty camp, this group of P.O.W.s was greeted by rows of prisoners standing four deep chanting "Ballotti...Ballotti..."

The obviously embarrassed soccer star, who was smaller than Tom had imagined him, just smiled and nodded. When the men were halted

at the parade ground in front of the barracks, Ballotti raised his hand slightly with a light flicking motion. The chanting stopped instantly.

"Damn," P.F.C. Orren whispered to the other soldiers. "I don't think one man on foot has held a crowd spellbound like this since the original Palm Sunday. Did he walk across the lake to get here?"

High school and college football in Second World War Oklahoma were enormously popular. Bennie Owens, the legendary coach of the University of Oklahoma Sooners, once said there were only two major sports in Oklahoma—football and spring football.

High school football in those days was played on Friday afternoons—not because of a war-time blackout of stadium lights, but because there weren't any lights. Due to the gasoline rationing, Tom had offered to drive the Outlaws to all their away games in one of the deuce-and-a-half camp trucks. He and Joseph Atubby would sit in back with the players, shouting encouragement and last-minute instructions over the bouncy roar of the truck. Connie, who had appointed herself official team nurse, sat up front.

Most of the surrounding small towns had never seen an Army truck before, so Tom had the driver pull the khaki vehicle as close to the field as possible, directly on the field if they'd let him. The suited-up players would then drop the tailgate and come pouring out of the truck with war whoops and shouts, gaining a temporary psychological advantage.

In Wetumka the advantage held. After a respectable ten-point loss to a powerhouse Okmulgee team that was supposed to cream them, the Outlaws arrived in a Wetumka rainstorm full of hope. And quickly, mud.

If you weren't a parent of one of the players, you might have marked the 1943 Wetumka-Weleetka football game among the ten most boring in sports history. The soaked Wetumka cheerleaders lost all their gumption early and refused to come back out for the second half. Skeeter fumbled three times, but the Wetumka running backs more than returned the favor. Not a single pass was completed by either side. Finally, in the fourth quarter with the rain coming sideways, Larry Agee lateraled to Skeeter and to his astonishment, and the groaning agony of the Wetumka fans, Skeeter found himself standing all alone on the sidelines, ball clutched in both hands. He daintily tiptoed thirty yards to the Wetumka ten, where he tripped making a cut and slid five more yards.

Three successive plays lost a total of two yards, and then over Skeeter's loud protestations, Tom told Big Boy Atubby to attempt a field goal.

That end of the field was virtually pristine, the whole game having been waged at midfield. The teams lined up. And then it happened. The rain stopped, just like that. Big Boy grinned at Coach Gregory, took the snap and then, just like his father before him, drop-kicked the ball dead center through the uprights. Three to nothing Outlaws, and that's how it ended.

Tom and assistant coach Joseph Atubby grabbed each other's shoulders, jumped up and down and tried not to go crazy. They failed, and so did the players, mud-bathing their victory hugs and screaming at the rain which had returned.

Half the town was waiting for them when the team pulled into the school parking lot that evening. Ed Carter was there. So was Elton Gaston, who brought gallon cartons of ice cream, root beer and R.C. Colas. Oklahoma Garland showed up with her camera, but to be honest, even with the flash, the photo in the following week's *American* looked less like a football team than a collection of Navaho mud dolls. Everyone was happy except perhaps Skeeter, who had been pried loose from the spotlight for the first time in his sports career. "I run forty yards to set up the only score, I singlehandedly keep Wetumka out of our end zone for the whole game, and what happens?" Skeeter was pretending to talk to the Agee twins, but you could hear him over in Dustin. "Big Boy The Tubby finally makes one straight kick and he's the hero. Well, I agree. Those Indian boys need all the pumping up they can get, deserved or not."

"Very classy, Mister Hamby," Oklahoma said. "Golly, will you look at this? Here I was all set to take your picture for the front page and I run out of film. Gosh darn the luck."

After the Muskogee game, where the Rough Riders gave them the thumping everyone expected, Weleetka played host to Henryetta. It was Homecoming, the biggest game of the year, and smart money said that Weleetka just might win.

Still riding the crest of his drop-kick celebrity, Big Boy Atubby was elected Homecoming King, which meant he got to kiss the Queen: Mary

Beth Devine's little sister Lou Ann, who everybody said was even better looking. But the big, lumbering fullback was unable to capture lightning in a bottle twice. Skeeter, who was stunned that the Homecoming award hadn't gone to him, ran wild in the first half, scoring both Weleetka touchdowns. Big Boy seemed confused, dropped an easy pass in the end zone and missed some key blocks, each time getting an earful from Skeeter. Big Boy made the first extra point, but just before halftime, he inexplicably shanked his second effort, leaving the Outlaws trailing by one point.

When Tom led the team into the gymnasium for the half, Skeeter pulled Big Boy back and, standing right in front of the home team bench, held him by the shoulder pads with one hand and began drilling the fullback's forehead insistently with the index finger of his other.

"Well, King Dumb Tubby, we're losing this game now, thanks to you. I guess my father was right about that Wetumka game—even a blind squirrel finds the nut sometimes. You better by God just stay out of my way next half. And when you crown Lou Ann Homecoming Queen? Just remember that I got to those lips long before you did, and they still belong to me."

Big Boy was close to tears. "I'm sorry, Skeeter. I'm really sorry. I'll just kiss her on the cheek, okay?"

The second half went even worse for the big man-child. After missing yet another extra point, he got pulled aside by Tom, who put his arm around him.

"Son, I want you to shake this off now," Tom said quietly. "I know Skeeter's riding you. I can see you looking at him every play, seeking his approval. You don't need his approval, Big Boy. Your father and I think you're playing just fine. You play hard, you play clean, you've never missed a day of practice. If I had an entire team of Big Boy Atubbies, I'd be the luckiest coach in Oklahoma." Tom slapped him on the fanny. "Forget about Skeeter. Now go out there and have some fun."

"Yes, sir, I will," Big Boy said, but they both could hear how hollow that sounded.

Deep in the fourth quarter, Big Boy took the hand-off from the quarterback on their own fifteen-yard line and in a play they'd practiced dozens of times, spun to lateral to Skeeter. But in his desire to execute perfectly, Big Boy hesitated, and the Henryetta linebacker could see what was unfolding. He simply stepped between the two Outlaws,

grabbed the lateral in mid-flight and trotted into the end zone for what proved to be the winning touchdown.

Big Boy groaned like a wounded buffalo and, keeping his helmet on to hide his humiliation, walked slowly to the end of the bench, where he remained.

"Shall I go to him, Lieutenant?" an obviously troubled Joseph Atubby asked.

"No, let him be, Joseph. This is a man's game and your son has just gotten a man-sized disappointment. The last thing he needs right now is to be treated like a kid." He turned to the rest of the team sitting dejectedly on the bench. "I know this is tough, fellows, but I want you to know how darned proud I am of all of you. This was the best game we've played all season, bar none. Now come on back to the gym with me. There are a few more things we need to discuss, then we can be on our way."

Skeeter walked up to Tom. "If it's all right with you, Coach," he said pleasantly, "I'd like to hang here with Big Boy for a few minutes. He's had a rough game."

Tom arched his brows. "I don't think so. It important we stay together as a team."

"C'mon, Coach. He's going to need a friend, and I'm just about the only one he's got left at the moment."

"Okay, Skeeter," Tom said, staring uncertainly at the young man. "That's very thoughtful of you. I guess Big Boy respects the dickens out of you. Take your time. We'll see you at the gym a little later."

Skeeter sat down next to the bigger player, who was openly crying now, his face in his two huge hands.

"I'm sorry, Skeeter. I'm sorry. I'm sorry."

"Well, King, life's a shit sandwich sometimes, and we all have to take a bite," he said brightly. "You need to learn from this, that's all." He flashed a conspiratorial look and glanced around. "Come around behind the concession stand with me just a minute. There's something I want to show you."

They moved to a secluded area between the stadium and concession stand, Skeeter patting Big Boy's shoulder pads with his left hand as they walked. Then, looking over his shoulder to make sure they were alone, Skeeter took off his leather helmet and, in a long swinging arc, smashed it into Atubby's face, shattering his nose and sending a river of blood down his chest. The big kid crumpled slowly to the ground, lifting one

arm in a half-hearted gesture of defense. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry," he moaned through the blood and broken teeth.

"You are sorry, you ignorant half-breed. You bet you're sorry. And you're about to be a lot sorrier, you useless lump of redskin shit." Skeeter continued to swing his helmet, catching arms, elbows and bloody hands. The fact that Big Boy had kept his own leather helmet on to hide his shame may have saved his life, because Skeeter's rage now had a mind of its own.

Ed Carter—high school principal, mayor, and Creek micco—was also in charge of the concession stand. He was just getting ready to close up, tallying the receipts when he heard their voices, then saw the attack through the back door. He rushed outside, and quick as a big cat, grabbed Skeeter by his shoulder pads and lifted him up, pinning him against the concession stand wall.

Skeeter's rage quickly turned to astonished panic as he recognized the much bigger and stronger man. He struggled briefly to escape, then slumped like prey awaiting its fate.

Carter's black eyes and mahogany face revealed no emotion as he huskily whispered into the terrified Skeeter's ear, "Twenty years ago I might have killed you for saying that." He rasped a dry, cruel laugh. "Now I'm going to do something that might even scare you more. I'm going to send you home to your daddy. And you be sure to tell Mister Hamby that I'll be coming by in the morning to explain why you've been kicked off the football team, expelled from school, and maybe why you're on your way to jail." He tossed the scrambling Skeeter aside like a bag of flour and dropped to his knees to take Big Boy's face in his hands. "C'mon son. Everything's going to be all right. Let me get you over to Lieutenant Ballard so she can have a look at that nose."



The Atubby farmhouse was three miles out of town, built on a slight rise a few hundred yards off the two-lane blacktop highway that led to Okmulgee. It was a modest one-story clapboard that had been painted and pretty when Mrs. Atubby was still alive, but in 1943 it was a faded beauty at best, the kind of house that it wouldn't surprise anybody to learn was occupied by two men.

One of the farm's fields had gone to clover, so Joseph Atubby bought a few hives and they made a little money selling honey at the rustic roadside stand they set up to sell whatever else was in season. On Saturdays Mrs. Grover from the next farm would come over with her pickled peaches, jams and jellies, so there would be somebody at the stand to take the money. On most of the other days of the week, Joseph would just leave the honey and produce in the stand with neatly handwritten signs placed under the items stating the cost. On one end of the stand was a five-gallon glass jug with a large slot in the top for customers to place their money when making a purchase. Everything was done on the honor system, and it seemed to work just fine. Big Boy had painted a large sign that dangled from a nail on the front of the stand:

CLOVER HONEY—TWO BITS.

Use the Jar. See You SAT.

When Tom and Connie pulled into the Atubby place, it was early Saturday morning, and Mrs. Grover hadn't made it over yet. The sign still hung on the front of the stand.

The sound of Tom's Ford crunching against gravel alerted a very large and ancient hound. It pulled itself up by its front legs to a sitting

position, looked at the car for a moment, and then in a gesture of almost funereal sadness, sank back with a grunt.

"That's my kind of dog," Tom said as he brought the car to a stop. "I'm not partial to the barkers and yappers."

"Aw, barking's what dogs do for a living, I guess. That and chase chickens. Although it does look like this old boy has retired from the business." She handed him a pastry box tied in string. "Here, hold this for a minute, will you, hon? I need to grab my medicine kit."

Joseph Atubby had heard the car, too, and stood on the porch by the open front screen door.

"Come in, folks, come in," he said. "Our patient's resting comfortably. Ed Carter's in there with him. We were just trying to decide who he looks more like—a raccoon or Jimmy Durante."

It was clear to Tom and Connie that Joseph was putting on a bravura act for his son's benefit, but his dark eyes told a different, and more dangerous story.

They walked into the living room where Big Boy—with two black eyes and a large white bandage across his nose—and Ed Carter were leaning into a floor-model Emerson radio. Carter smiled and raised one finger that said come on in, but don't talk. Because these were radio days, neither Tom nor Connie thought a thing about it, just quietly settled into their tasks. Connie sat next to Big Boy to see how he was doing and opened her medical kit. Tom put the pastry box on the doily-covered dining table that was begging to be dusted, and stared off into the middle distance; this was the polite response to the finger in the air, meaning Yes, I'm listening, too.

After a few minutes, Big Boy reached over and snapped off the radio. His voice sounded a little thick. "Sorry, Coach, sorry ma'am. That's my favorite show—*Smilin' Ed McConnell's Buster Brown Show*. It was Ghunga, the East Indian Boy this week."

"Oh, I know that one," Tom laughed. "Sergeant Hare makes me listen to it every time it comes on. That's the one with his bull elephant Teelah, right? You feeling okay? Lieutenant Ballard brought you something from the commissary."

"Rhubarb pie," Connie said, gently peeling the bandage away from the clotted and badly bruised nose. "I know it's your favorite. That looks pretty good, Big Boy, all things considered. Now hold still while I change the dressing."

It was possible that Ed Carter had never laughed in his entire adult life, but his snort was pretty close as he looked at the dessert they had brought. "Is that Ham Hamby's rhubarb pie?"

Connie smiled, meeting his gaze. "Not anymore. New days down at the V.F.W."

"Just might be new days coming around the Hamby house, too," Joseph growled.

"Speaking of Mister Hamby, Mister Carter, are you going to go see him this morning?" Tom asked. "The only reason I'm wearing my uniform is I think I ought to go over there myself. Maybe I could go along with you."

"I wouldn't advise it, Lieutenant, especially in that uniform. I went over to see Hamby and Skeeter last night, and it's lucky I did. Brother, can that kid tell whoppers. He's dangerous, and I've never said that about a kid before. He was trying to put the blame on you, if you can believe that. When I got there, he was ranting and raving about how you'd been picking on him all season, stuff like that. Hamby hadn't gone to the game, been down in Hanna with that ol' gal he's sweet on, and when he got home, Skeeter just started sprinkling poison on everything and everybody. When I told Hamby what really happened—how Skeeter had damned near beat you to death, Big Boy, and how I caught him in the act—I saw something in Hamby's face I'd never seen before. He wouldn't look at Skeeter, just kept looking at the floor. He knew I was telling the truth. Maybe he'd been expecting it. When I said that I was kicking Skeeter off the football team and expelling him for the rest of the semester, Hamby didn't say anything, just kept looking at his shoes. Skeeter just went nuts, saying he was only defending himself, and that none of this would have happened if you and—pardon me, Lieutenant—your dagoes hadn't come to town."

Ed Carter stood and paced slowly around the room; that was as agitated as that quiet man got. "He shouted something about you letting the prisoners run all over Weleetka, and that we needed to protect ourselves instead of letting you take over the high school and the V.F.W. hall and the lake and everything. When Hamby still didn't say anything, Skeeter yelled, 'What can you expect from a chicken shit father who'd rather lay with squaw whores than watch his own son play football,' and ran out the door. I heard Hamby's car start, then everything got quiet again. Hamby still didn't say anything. When he looked up at me there were tears coming down his face." He slowly shook his head. "So don't go over there. It won't do anybody any good. Not yet."

The five people sat in silence while Connie put the finishing touches on Big Boy's new bandage. "There you go, good as new," she said unnecessarily, just to have some conversation floating in the air.

Finally a pensive Tom spoke. "Mister Carter, you're the mayor as well as principal. Are there other people in town who feel that way, feel we're harming the town?"

"Well, folks are a little confused, I guess," said the Mayor. "First we hear that the government in Italy has surrendered, and then we hear that Mussolini is back in power. Nobody seems to know how long the P.O.W.s are going to be here. We don't mind having them, you understand."

Joseph moved around the table and sat down next to his son. "Mind? Excuse me for butting in, Ed, but I can tell you the farm families are as happy as a pig ... well, they're just real happy to have your people here. Ask Mrs. Grover when she comes over. Two of her three boys are taking free music lessons thanks to the prisoners, and the oldest one's in the glee club."

"Glee club?"

"Yes, thanks to you and the P.O.W.s, Weleetka High School has a glee club again," Ed Carter said proudly. "Every week Private Lipton brings that conductor Mister Pensotti over to give singing lessons. Brings that Angel guy with him sometimes. We finally had so many sign up, we've got a glee club. And we've got a dance band, too, The Lighthorsemen. That's what we Creeks call our Indian police. Get it? Outlaws and Lighthorsemen?" He quietly put his palms together. "Don't worry. You are good neighbors, Lieutenant, everybody in town says that. Which brings me to something I've been meaning to ask you. It's in the nature of a favor."

"You caught me at a good time. How can I help?"

"Well, you've probably seen a bunch of my people watching that Italian football your men play. Ever since you got that new guy, we're getting so many spectators, we've been thinking about putting in bleachers. So anyway, some of the young men wanted me to ask you if you'd let the prisoners teach them how to play. They said they'd be happy to teach our stick ball game, what we call the little brother of war, to them in return."

"Floyd's been pestering me about that, too," Tom said. "Sure, I'll ask the prisoner representative when we get back to camp. Seeing as

how he is also the head of your glee club, I'd say it's a shoo-in. I'd kind of like to see an Indian ball game myself. Wouldn't you, Connie?"

"Sure, just as long as you promise me to keep Skeeter as far away from those clubs as possible."

There was a chill in the air, and Floyd had laid a fire in the big stone fireplace in the camp administration building. It gave the place the feel of a hunting lodge.

Blowing softly on his cocoa, Tom was amused to see how animated Pete Patterson had gotten. Pete was standing in front of the fire, all arms and gestures, every inch the Italian.

"Slow down, Pete. I mean, garlic? You're getting all worked up over garlic?"

"Yes sir, garlic. *Aglio*—the stinking rose. And you will be too, when you hear my proposition. This is something I've been wanting to do for years, and now thanks to your men, I've got the chance. Mind if I help myself to the coffee? Oh, don't let me forget, I brought you a couple of bottles of special coffee. They're out in the car."

As usual, he didn't wait for Tom to respond, just went racing ahead. "You know I make the best spaghetti sauce in Oklahoma, maybe the whole planet, but I don't want to brag. Everybody says so, and everybody's always wanting to know my secret. Well, it's garlic, just plain old garlic, which you know about, cause you come from an Italian family. But garlic is about as common to Oklahomans as okra is to Eskimos. Prairie farmers don't know how to grow it, and if you can't put it on a cheeseburger or a chicken fried steak, cooks around here don't know what to make of it. My boys and I have been able to grow enough for the restaurant out on the farm, but now I'm going to need more, maybe a lot more. And here's where your guys come in. You still with me?"

"I think so, but I swear, talking to you can be like drinking out of a fire hose sometimes. How do the prisoners fit in to whatever in the hell you're talking about?"

"Okay, I'm sitting in my restaurant one night last week, and these four oilmen from Tulsa come in for dinner. I've seen them in there before; they're a little boisterous, but real nice. So I stop by the table and we have a glass of wine. They're telling me how great the food is and everything, and this one guy says he wished to hell he could get this

spaghetti sauce in Tulsa rather than having to come all the way down to Krebs. So I say no problem, I could sell them a few bottles to take back.”

Pete sat down in an old leather chair Floyd had brought out from the newspaper, and started talking like he was telling a Christmas story. “So we have another glass, and this one guy, Mister Huffman, says, ‘Well that’s sort of what we came to talk to you about. What if we want to buy more than a few bottles? What if we want to buy a million bottles?’ ‘That’ll cost you a million bucks,’ I say. ‘That wouldn’t be a problem,’ says Mister Huffman, ‘the oil business is pretty good these days. Could you deliver?’ Well, I figure it’s just the wine talking, but I want to be respectful, so I say, ‘Sure, what’s your plan?’ So to cut to the chase, these guys are going to set up a food canning and bottling center in Tulsa, and the first product they want to come out with is my spaghetti sauce. What do you think about that? Want to help me?”

“Well....”

Pete leaned forward on the edge of the chair. “I knew you’d say yes. I’m going to need tons of garlic, and not just that scrawny stuff they sell in Texas, either. I’m going to grow the best garlic in the world. I can’t get it from Italy, of course, but I’m going to the next best place. I’m going to California, Tom—Gilroy, California, what they call the garlic capital of the world—and I’m going to bring back starter cloves as big as oranges, and just as sweet. And I don’t have to worry anymore that Oklahoma farmers don’t know how to grow garlic. You’ve got three hundred men just outside this room who know everything about garlic. And man, are we going to make the Army proud of you. Harvest season is over in these parts now, Tom, but garlic planting season is just beginning. I’ve already talked to Johnny Man Wingo; he’s willing to lease me all the land I want. We can put some money in the prisoners’ pockets, not to mention my own, and the Army will give you a medal for keeping the men busy and productive. This may become the first P.O.W. camp in America to show a profit. Whadda you say?”

“Phew. You do go on, my friend, but sure, it sounds great. But Pete, how do we know these guys are legit? How do we know it wasn’t the wine talking?”

Pete patted the breast pocket of his faded denim jacket. “This \$1,000 check from Mister Huffman convinced me. Good enough for you?”



It was one of those surprise Indian summer mornings that you know shouldn’t have come and couldn’t last. Time out of joint, a warm intruder that made the trees seem even barer than they were. Tom, Floyd and Vito stood around the open tool shed next to the soccer field, not saying much, just drinking coffee and watching Floyd work. Floyd was sharpening and oiling one of the lawn mowers in preparation for storage until spring. Tom had long ago noticed that Floyd could no more stop working with his hands than he could stop breathing. Tom and Vito, on the other hand, were not stricken with that affliction. They would alternately pick things up, turn them over, inspect them, and put them down again. Then they would nod knowingly and smile at Floyd, like children seeking a father’s approval at the work bench.

Outside, a lone figure stood on the brown October field, bouncing a ball from knee to knee, occasionally sending a header past an imaginary defender, then weaving through a ghost team with blinding footwork, only to stop abruptly and resume his knee juggling act.

“Is that all that guy does?” Tom asked finally. “Every time I come back here, he’s either playing or practicing.”

Vito shook his head sadly. “Morning, noon and night. Poor old Ballotti. I thought he had a gift; now I wonder if it’s not a curse. Soccer is all he knows. And now he plays out his career in Oklahoma, where nobody’s even heard of the game. It’s like Caruso in Borneo.” He caught Floyd’s flinty look. “I’m sorry, Floyd. I meant no offense. It was just a, a, what we call in Italian a *metofero*, and not a good one. I should have said Caruso on Elba. He’s almost always alone. We thought he was stuck up when he first got here, but actually he’s shy and, well, kind of dumb. Talking to him is like talking to a head of lettuce.”

"I see him talking to Plutarco from time to time," Floyd noted.

"As Charlie Chan would say, honorable case closed," Vito pointed out. "Yeah, the two of them are together a lot, passing the ball back and forth, stuff like that. Plutarco told me he's going to teach Ballotti English. Ha! That should be something."

Tom picked up a shovel, decided it passed his inspection, and placed it back in the stack that would soon be on the way to the garlic fields. "Enough about old Plutarco, okay? He's no Einstein maybe, but he's a robust and jolly soul who wouldn't hurt a fly. I wouldn't mind having a hundred Plutarcos, especially now that he learned which end of the toothbrush means business. Take these shovels out to the truck, will you, Vito? Why didn't *you* sign up for garlic detail? Pete says there's good money to be made out there."

Vito just shrugged. "Sorry, Lieutenant, but I'm from Flatbush, remember? I always thought that garlic came in strings hanging next to the cheeses at Gambino's market. When it comes to farming, I make Ballotti and Plutarco look like the Quiz Kids." He turned and trotted down to the deuce-and-a-half with an armload of shovels.

Floyd stood and started arranging another stack of shovels and hoes for the garlic planters. "I don't know if Ballotti will ever go on *Doctor I.Q.* with Murray, but he is a very nice man, so generous and patient with all the Creek folks who've been coming over here to learn soccer. And believe me, he needs to be patient. And forgiving. And quick on the mend."

"Is he getting banged up?" Tom asked, curious. "I would have thought he was way too nimble for those guys to even touch him."

Floyd laughed. "You're never too nimble to dodge a bullet. I told you that Italian football was sort of like our Indian ball game? Well, I didn't know much about it myself when I said that. Neither team is allowed to use our hands, that much is true, and we score points by putting a ball through a goal, but it pretty much ends there. The Italian game is one of the most gentlemanly things I've ever seen. They pass that big ball back and forth like they're playing basketball on grass. It's so graceful, especially the way Ballotti plays it. And when they slide too hard into somebody on the other team or push somebody in the back, you know what happens?"

"Sure, they call a foul and the other team gets the ball from that spot. Or if the foul is too close to the goal, they get a free kick. Don't forget, I went to a lot of matches with my grandfather in Cleveland."

"That's right, Lieutenant, I keep forgetting you're part Italian. But the thing that really tickles me is when somebody fouls too hard, the referee goes up to him, stands right in front of him and pulls a little yellow card out of his pocket and waves it in the man's face. And the man starts making all kinds of gestures like it's just about the worst thing that's ever happened to him in his life and he can't believe the injustice. Last week, one of the new guys, I can't remember his name, tripped Tough Tony and when Tony ran up and sort of got in the guy's face, the new guy pushed him down. That's all, pushed him down." Floyd was laughing by this time like he's telling a story about life on another planet. "So the referee rushes up to the new guy and waves a little red card this time. And you know what the guy does?"

"I know what he's supposed to do. He's supposed to leave the game."

"Bingo," Floyd shouted, still laughing. "The guy just walked away with his head down like he'd been caught in the cookie jar. We couldn't believe it."

"Don't you Creeks have rules and referees?"

"Referees yes, rules not so much. I guess that's why we also refer to it as the little brother of war. It's as rough and tumble as soccer is gentlemanly. Our referees toss the ball in the air to get things going, and then they pretty much stay the hell out of the way. For us it's more about running and tricking our opponent. You ever play Keep Away in grade school? Our game is more like that. Ballotti is teaching the guys a lot about passing the ball and teamwork, but every now and then they still get excited and just fire the ball right at somebody. Ballotti has caught a few passes on the back of his head, coming about twenty miles an hour. He's so good-natured about it. Just wags his finger and shrugs it off."

"Rob tells me that you and Ed Carter have invited some of the players to see one of your ball games tomorrow. I think it's a great idea."

"Yeah, it should be fun. Lots of food and everything. We're playing Dustin. Why don't you come along, Lieutenant?"

Tom gave a swing blade the once-over. "I'd like to, Floyd, and I thought I might make it. But I've been called back to Camp Gruber to meet with Major Appleton. Some hush-hush deal, but then again, aren't they all? I'll be back day after tomorrow, though, and you can tell me all about it."



The ball field was just a couple of miles from the prison camp on the Old Dustin Road, the same place they'd held the Green Corn Ceremonies a few months before.

The men marched excitedly down the gravel road, led by Floyd and Lieutenant Rob Luke, with Corporal Victor Muñoz serving as trailer. Muñoz had come along as translator, but this mostly proved unnecessary, because the entire pre-game ceremonies and the game itself would be conducted entirely in Creek. On this day and in this place, the Italians had entered Indian Territory in every sense of the word, an ancient time and place where Creeks ruled their piece of the world. The field and adjoining stomp grounds were only five miles from Weleetka, but most of the whites in town had never visited them and were only vaguely aware of their existence.

Rob Luke could tell he'd stepped into another dimension as they approached the ball field. Men and women were sitting in the beds of pickups and on car fenders and running boards, folding chairs and blankets, talking and laughing easily as they watched the players anointing their bodies with greasy paints and making preparations for the game.

Rob turned to Floyd. "I know I'm still pretty new around here, but every time I've been to town the Indians, especially the men, were so quiet I just thought that's the way you were."

"Well, people who live on the land, farmers and such, probably don't talk as much as city folks, that's a fact." Floyd led them to a stand of scrub oaks. "But you give an Indian something worth talking about, and half a chance, he's liable to talk your leg off. You ought to hear us arguing in some of our council meetings. That's when you can hear some real good talking. Good and long, good and strong, and just plain good. Just ask Murray. He's seen us in action." There was a note of pride in Floyd's voice that impressed Rob.

"I know you two are mighty close, and I wish Murray could have been with us today," Rob said with an apologetic look on his face. "I'm sorry I couldn't let him come with us, but we're shorthanded as it is, and with Lieutenant Gregory at Camp Gruber, somebody has to handle the paperwork and mind the store."

"That's all right. He's been down to the stomp grounds and ball field before, a couple of times. Besides, I think music and stomp dancing are more to his taste than our ball games. They can get rough as a cob, as Miss Connie might say."

Victor Muñoz joined the two men after giving a few instructions to the prisoners. "When do we actually get to the field for this ball game?" Muñoz asked.

Floyd chuckled. "You're standing on it, Corporal. Ain't it a beaut?" He waved his arm in a wide arc to encompass the pasture.

"I'm a little confused, I guess," Muñoz said. "You mean you use this whole field?" He pointed to his right. "I see two poles painted white way down there, and those two poles with the red tops over here. But holy crap, they must be three hundred yards apart. It doesn't look like this place has been mowed a single day in its life. Aren't there any lines? How can you tell if you're out of bounds? And what about those little bushes right in the middle? What do you do about them?"

"We play around them and through them. Same for the long grass and jimson weed. It's all part of the game. And once it really gets going, they don't pay much attention to boundaries and such. You better tell the men to look sharp, 'cause if a ball goes flying into the spectators, so will the players. Now get your guys settled, here comes Mister Carter to get things kicked off. He's the main referee today."

Ed Carter was dressed like he was going to a wedding, as were the other three referees. He wore a white dress shirt, black tie and five-buttoned vest. The only thing that distinguished him from a banker was his high-crowned black felt fedora with two eagle feathers. He strode to the center of the field and held a white handkerchief over his head. At this signal, he was joined by forty barefoot men in loincloths who formed two lines on either side of him. Half the men wore tee shirts and the other half were bare-chested.

"We used to call this shirts and skins when I played basketball in high school," Rob Luke observed. "We kept inviting the girls to play, but told them they'd have to be skins. Being a Catholic school and all, we never had any takers."

"You white boys are way ahead of us sometimes," Floyd laughed. "The Creek gals play ball against the guys all the time. They get to use their hands to make things more even. It never dawned on us to make 'em take their shirts off." He grinned. "Good thinking ... 'course we're all 'skins' here. Now Chief Carter is going over the rules: no banging each other over the head on purpose, no poking the end of your stick in the other guy's ribs, no gouging anybody's eye out, stuff like that. Listen up."

The Italians were fascinated by the paint-streaked players and Ed Carter's rumbling Indian language. For the first time since they arrived, the prisoners felt they had dropped into the middle of a cowboy movie.

On Carter's signal, the players went to their respective goal. A rope had been tied between the goal posts at each end of the field. Slung over the ropes were the players' game sticks, tied together by rawhide, which the men selected with much pageantry, war whoops and gobbles.

Each player had two hickory sticks about three feet long and a half inch in diameter, and held one in each hand, the way one might hold a baseball bat. At one end of each stick was a small, artistically-curved basket with rawhide webbing just large enough to catch and hold the leather ball. The game ball was only slightly larger than a golf ball, and almost as hard.

"I don't see how you could find the ball in all these weeds," Muñoz marveled.

"Sometimes you can't, and sometimes you pretend you can't just to trick your opponent. That's part of the game, too. And when you do find it, you still got to pick it up, which gets harder when there are all those other sticks in there trying to pick it up themselves. It's a running game, but a lot of time is spent with everybody all huddled up, trying to pull the ball out of the pile."

The players took their positions on the field and held their sticks ceremoniously above their heads in an ancient gesture that meant this was just pretend war, not the real thing. Ed Carter finished his remarks, stood between the two opposing center men, and—just as Floyd had predicted—tossed the ball high in the air and quickly moved to safe ground. Then with war whoops and much pushing and shoving, the game began.

"Chief Carter said this would be a game of eight today, so whoever scores eight goals first wins." Floyd ushered Rob and Victor out of harm's way. "Then he said in honor of our guests from Camp Chigger Lake, we will have a demonstration game between the men and women. Victor, he also said that if any of the Italians want to give it a try, they can join the women. So please get the word out to the men. But make sure they understand that everybody has to keep their shirt on."

Wally Pipp and two cooks arrived in a jeep. They set up a couple of field tables near a brush arbor with box lunches, fruit, bread, lemonade and—despite the unseasonably warm weather—an urn of hot coffee

with sugar, a big pitcher of cream, and lots of paper cups. "Let the folks know they're welcome to coffee and rolls," Pipp yelled over to Floyd. "I brought plenty for the occasion."

It soon became clear that the Indians, especially the giggly young women, were as curious about the prisoners as they were the outcome of the game. Pushing back their natural shyness and enticed by the aroma of real coffee, the Creeks came straggling over, just a few men at first, then men and women, warily taking a cup of coffee or piece of bread; then like gazelles at a watering hole, skittishly retreating, pretending not to notice the prisoners, but watching them like a hawk.

This was the first time the Italians had seen women other than the closely-supervised book brigade in almost a year, and even though they knew they had been brought there to watch the ball game, some of the men—Tough Tony and Morino the postman especially—began mugging for the ladies. Morino juggled three hard rolls and Tony flexed his huge blacksmith muscles like Charles Atlas, much to the tittering amusement of the young girls. Then unable to stand it any longer, Gino Ballotti stepped forward with a soccer ball that had appeared out of thin air. To the delighted gasps of the crowd, Ballotti gave a World Cup performance, dribbling the ball from foot to knee to head to shoulder, one time rolling the ball down his back until he kicked it with his heel high in the air, and catching it on his forehead like a trained seal. If the players in the ball game hadn't been too busy trying to score goals and avoiding hits to the noggin, they might have noticed that the audience, predominately the distaff side, was more than a little distracted.

In a few hours, a cluster of men at the near goal raised their sticks in triumph and let out a cacophony of gobbles, whoops and yells.

"Well, I'll be damned, Dustin won," Floyd said cheerfully. "Not that all that many people noticed. Okay, Lieutenant Luke, this is where your men can join in the fun. But seriously, tell your men to behave like gentlemen. Remind them that all the men on the other team are carrying baseball bats. And tell them to take their shoes off. I don't want those galoots like Plutarco stepping all over my barefoot boys."

Victor turned and repeated Floyd's admonition to the Italians, who laughed appreciatively. Four or five prisoners, including Tough Tony, Plutarco, and the postman, dutifully placed their boots by the brush arbor and joined in the game. Ballotti was content to stay on the sidelines, continuing to dribble his soccer ball before a giggling gaggle of fans.

After about a half an hour, the demonstration ended and the crowd began to disperse, wanting to get home ahead of the green clouds forming off to the southwest. Wally and his cooks packed up and drove away in the jeep, and the men formed up for the short march back to camp. Then they heard a horn honking and looked up to see Pete Patterson and his garlic planters come rumbling down the dusty road in two of the big camp trucks.

When the lead truck stopped directly in front of the men, Pete leaned his head out of the driver's-side window. "*Buon giorno, signori,*" he shouted. "*Posso dargli un giro?*"

Rob asked Victor, "What is he saying?"

"He's asking us if we want a ride."

"Good idea," Floyd said. "I don't like the looks of those clouds."

Rob Luke blew once on the whistle he kept on a lanyard around his neck. "All right, everybody, we're going back to the camp in style. Find yourself a place in back with the garlic guys. Pete, no offense, but your men smell a little pungent. We'll ride up front with you."

Gino Ballotti reached down to give his friend Plutarco a hand into the truck. The gentle giant was the last to get there, as usual. Just as he was about to jump on board, Plutarco looked down at his bare feet, smiled up at Ballotti, shrugged and slapped himself on the forehead in the universal gesture of forgetfulness, then loped away in his goofy gait to retrieve his boots from the brush arbor.

There were a couple of sharp cracks of thunder and the trucks pulled away, leaving the forgotten Plutarco at the stomp grounds.



Tom huddled in the cocoon of his Ford as he made his way down the rain-slick highway that took him back to Chigger Lake. The temperature must have dropped at least thirty degrees since he set out for Camp Gruber only two days ago, but it wasn't the drizzling weather that had Tom thankful for the warmth and safety of his little coupe. This was so much bigger, and so full of uncertainties, that Tom simply couldn't wrap his mind around it yet.

For the first time in Tom's military career, the secret meeting had really dealt with a secret—a secret that was about to pop wide open. It was a national secret, but it would personally have an impact on Tom—perhaps a profound one. Would he stay in Weleetka? And what about Connie? She still had thousands of German prisoners to think about. And what about all the generals in Washington? Were they so busy winning wars, they hadn't figured out what to do if they did? What was everybody thinking? Tom was passing this guilt up the chain of command, but honestly, it had never occurred to him either—not in so many words.

He turned on the radio for a little music to clear his cobwebbed mind, but forgot it was Sunday morning. Sunday morning radio in 1943 Oklahoma was a choice among local preachers, the evangelical Reverend A. A. Allen out of Fort Worth, or *Lamp Unto My Feet* on the aptly-named Blue network coming out of Chicago. Even the classical music station from Tulsa that Oklahoma Garland loved so much was airing Father Fulton Sheen. Tom listened to the cheerful and often funny Father Sheen for a few minutes.

He turned off the radio, and when he made the slow, curving descent into Weleetka, he absentmindedly noted that Little River was

full, cascading through a culvert he'd never noticed before. He thought about Floyd telling him the day they met to alert the newspaper if there was ever any water in Little River. "Should be a banner day for the *American* this week," Tom muttered to himself, and dropped into silence, thinking about what he would tell the prisoners.

The rain had trailed off to a light drizzle when he pulled into camp. To his astonishment, he found the entire camp population formed in ranks on the parade ground, with camp representative Aldo Pensotti standing at attention in front. Corporal Muñoz and Private Lipton were going from prisoner to prisoner, with Lipton making notes on a clipboard.

What the hell? Tom thought. Have they heard? How could they?

He slammed the car door and, ignoring his rain coat, hurried to the assembly. Lieutenant Luke came rushing out of the headquarters building, saluting on the run.

"Thank goodness you got here, Tom. I just got off the phone with the Sheriff. He's on his way out here.

"The fault is mine," Aldo Pensotti shouted, frozen in a salute. "I forgot the roll call last night. I am very sorry, Lieutenant Gregory."

"Would somebody please tell me what the hell is going on?" Tom demanded, putting his arm on Rob's shoulder. The other Lieutenant was clearly shaken. "Why did you call the Sheriff? Why are all these men standing out here in the rain?" He turned slightly. "For pity's sake, put your arm down, Aldo, and tell me what happened."

"Come back in the office with me, Tom, and I'll tell you everything we know." Rob said to Aldo, "*Maestro*, you and your men stand right there and don't move until we finish taking roll."

The two men walked into the empty office and for the first time he could remember, Tom couldn't smell cigarette smoke. "Where's Jesse?"

"He and Floyd have been out since early morning," Rob answered. "Two of the men are missing, Plutarco and that soccer guy Ballotti. We're pretty sure they didn't try to escape. We think they're lost." Rob passed his hands over his cherubic and now crestfallen face. "Oh shit, Tom. Apparently we came back from that Indian ball game yesterday and left Plutarco behind. It was raining cats and dogs when we got back to the camp, and everybody just scurried back to their barracks. I'm so sorry, Tom, so sorry."

"Calm down, Rob. They can't really go anywhere, and if they are lost, Floyd will find them. Damn. What about Ballotti? Did you forget him, too?"

Rob sat down heavily in his swivel chair, his face twisted. "I deserve that, I guess. Actually we're not sure where he is either. You know he and Plutarco were best friends. We think Ballotti got back here, then took off again when Plutarco didn't show up with the second truck. One of the other prisoners said he thought he saw him running out of the gates and told Vito. Vito told Jesse and then they all high tailed it out of here. Private Connelly went with them. They've been out since before dawn. I already said that, didn't I."

"I'm sorry I spoke harshly, Rob. I've had a lot on my mind and now this. I'm sure you did the best you could." He put a reassuring hand on Rob's shoulder. "Did Floyd tell you where they were going? I need to get out there."

"Yes, he was expecting you. He said to meet him down at the stomp grounds. I can show you where that is. That's the last place any of us saw Plutarco, so we're using that as the staging area. Everybody's supposed to check back on the hour. That's in ten minutes. We can just make it."

They drove to the brush arbor where Plutarco had left his boots the day before. Floyd and Private Connelly stood under the arbor with a young man Tom didn't recognize, who was dressed in a red plaid hunter's coat and a John Deere cap.

"Morning, Lieutenant," Floyd said, all business. "Glad you could make it. This is my cousin, Monday Harjo. He may have a line on Plutarco, at least. Sergeant Hare and Vito should be on their way in soon. Then we can compare notes."

"Good morning everybody." Tom shook the young man's hand, and nodded to the other two men. "So they're still on the loose? Do we know what's going on?"

"Yeah, they're still out there somewhere. Here's what we can piece together so far, but it's not much," Floyd explained. "We had an Indian ball game out here yesterday, as you know. I didn't go back in the truck with the men, but helped a bunch of guys take the folding chairs back to Dustin, and I stayed over, just like most Saturday nights. When I got into camp first thing this morning, all hell was breaking loose. Instead of coming back with the other prisoners, apparently Plutarco wandered off. And Ballotti took it on himself to go find him."

"You don't have to protect me, Floyd," the red-faced Rob Luke said. "I already told Lieutenant Gregory that I just forgot Plutarco when it started raining. It's all my fault."

"That's a manly thing to say, Lieutenant. But finding fault is easy. Finding these guys may be a horse of a different color. It's been raining all night and there are no tracks anywhere for either one of them. Ballotti ran out this morning to find his friend and now we can't find him, either. But maybe Monday's grandmother saw Plutarco. Tell the Lieutenant what you just told me, okay?"

"Okay, Cousin Floyd." The young man pointed to a small farmhouse on the other side of the road. "We just live right over there. When I saw Cousin Floyd down here a little while ago, he told me they were looking for some prisoners and had I seen them and it dawned on me that maybe my grandmother did see one of them. She told me she was sitting on the porch yesterday evening watching the rain and lightning and she saw this big man dressed all in black, but when he started running he turned into a black wolf or maybe a ghost wolf. Then she said this big old car pulled up next to the wolf and after a while the wolf got in, so it must have turned back into a man. She said they took off down the road that goes back behind the lake, but she didn't want to look too much, in case it was a ghost. When Floyd said the prisoners all dress in black, I figured it must be one of them."

"And you know how Plutarco runs funny," Floyd said. "That's the direction Sergeant Hare went, so who knows? Here they come now, right on time."

Jesse Hare and Vito D'Amico pulled their jeep alongside the others. The two men grabbed towels out of the back of the jeep and dried their faces. It had stopped raining, but the open vehicle with its flattened windshield attracted water like a magnet. "Hey, Lieutenant, glad you're back. You heard?"

"Yes, I did, Jesse, thanks. Lieutenant Luke briefed me and has the camp well in hand." Out of the corner of his eye Tom could see Rob flash him a grateful look. "What about you? Any luck?"

"Yes, maybe, and thank goodness you are here, Floyd. We came upon some dilapidated buildings with a little chapel right in the middle."

"That's the old Baptist Bible School camp," Floyd said.

"Yeah, well, it didn't look so bible schoolish today. There were beer bottles all over the place. Somebody had themselves a party. Then we saw this old guy come out of the chapel. He kept saying something in Indian and pointing off behind the lake. We couldn't understand him, so we motioned for him to stay put. He just turned around and walked back

in the chapel and we hot-footed it back here to find you. Maybe you can figure out what he was saying."

The four soldiers piled into Sergeant Hare's jeep and drove off, followed closely by Floyd and Vito in the Pontiac.

"Do you have your weapon, Rob?" Tom asked.

"Yes sir."

"So do I," offered Sergeant Hare. "You expecting trouble?"

"Maybe. From what I can make of the cousin's story, and considering he didn't have any friends with cars around here, I think Plutarco might have been abducted. Lord knows where Ballotti is."

They pulled up to the chapel and waited for Floyd. Tom hopped out and picked up something he saw resting on the ground among the beer bottles. "Did you leave this here, Jesse?" It was an empty pack of Lucky Strike Greens.

"No, Lieutenant, sorry, I didn't even notice them. That means Plutarco must have been here."

"Or still is," Tom said. As Floyd pulled up beside them and got out of the car, Tom added, "You and Connelly start checking those buildings. And keep your pistol ready. Floyd, let's go talk to the old man."

Floyd, Rob and Tom entered the chapel to find the old man kneeling before a wooden cross nailed to the far wall. He turned his head to the intruders and looked at Floyd with sad, dead eyes. He pointed a bony finger to his right.

"*Ilatito', to', to',*" he said in that hollow, ancient way of the Creek language, and then said it again.

Floyd walked up and placed his hand reassuringly on the man's head, then tapped Tom on the shoulder and silently moved to the door.

"What did he say, Floyd?" Tom asked.

"He said, 'He is dead, dead, dead.' I got a feeling we found Plutarco."

Just as they were starting to fan out in the general direction indicated by the old man, they heard an anguished scream. "Did that sound like Ballotti to you?" Floyd said, running full tilt now, his cowboy boots sinking into the wet, leafy muck of the campgrounds.

There was another shout. "Over here, Lieutenant!" Private Connelly yelled. "Oh sweet Jesus, Mary and Joseph!"

"Ballotti!" Vito shouted. "Plutarco!"

Connelly's shouts and Ballotti's animal cries chilled the rescuers as they reached a small grove of pecan trees. "Please don't let him be dead, please don't let him be dead," Rob repeated as they ran.

They reached a large pecan tree where Private Connelly was frantically trying to pull a struggling, crazed Gino Ballotti away from a slumping figure pinned against the trunk of the tree. Ballotti's hands were torn and bleeding where he had been trying to untie the strands of barbed wire that held the lifeless figure of Plutarco in place. Plutarco's head angled unnaturally up and to one side, his left eye protruding angrily from his almost unrecognizable face. Plutarco was dead.

"Vito, try to calm Ballotti down, will you?" Floyd said, inspecting the barbed wire. "Connelly, go down to my car and bring me back the wire cutters that are in the trunk. There are some blankets back there. Bring them, too."

Vito cradled the now-sobbing Ballotti in his arms. "What kind of mad-man would do this?" he asked pleadingly. "Who would kill this gentle soul?"

Tom, Jesse and Vito stood apart as Floyd and Private Connelly cut Plutarco's body down and covered it with a blanket. Vito stood beside Ballotti, who was kneeling with his face buried in his hands.

Sergeant Hare talked around a cigarette bobbing between his lips, trying to affect a tough guy attitude he didn't feel. "Well, at least the war is over for that poor bastard."

An offended Vito appeared ready to throw a punch, so Tom put his hand firmly on Vito's shoulder. "Soon it will be over for you and Gino as well—not that it will help Plutarco, or you for the time being, at least. That's why they called me back to Camp Gruber." Except for Ballotti, the other men turned to stare dumbly at Tom. "I was going to fill everyone in later; this isn't really the time or place, I think," he said quietly.

"What do you mean the war's over? What do you mean it won't help us? Are we going home or aren't we?" Vito asked, his voice rising in angry confusion.

"Calm down. I'll tell you all about it when we get back to camp. But no, you're not going home just yet, Vito. We can't send you back. Even though the Italian government has surrendered, Mussolini and Hitler haven't. I know there has been talk of prisoner releases, but that's not

going to happen. The war with Italy is finished, but Mussolini isn't." He looked into the befuddled eyes of Vito D'Amico. "You're no longer prisoners of war. Now you are prisoners of fate."

Tom pulled into his parking place to find a muddy black Plymouth with a white star and the carefully-printed words “Okfuskee County Sheriff’s Department” on the front door.

This truly is the day from hell, Tom thought. What next?

He very quickly discovered the “what next” in the person of Everett Hamby, slumped dejectedly in the leather chair by the fireplace, his face in his hands. Okfuskee County Sheriff George Grayson stood over him.

Tom had only met Sheriff Grayson twice before, once a social visit and once at the Watermelon Festival, where the Sheriff was one of the judges of the Miss Weleetka beauty contest. The tall red-headed officer lived and worked in Okemah, fifteen miles north, and rarely had reason to get to Weleetka. Grayson once had a deputy in Weleetka, but he joined the Army and was never replaced.

“Afternoon, Lieutenant, sorry for the delay. Got here as soon as I could. It never rains but it pours, as they say. Understand you got some escaped prisoners.”

“Not anymore. But now it’s far worse, I’m afraid—one of the prisoners is dead. Excuse me just a second, Sheriff. I must get word to Camp Gruber immediately.” Tom could hear Hamby moan even as he turned away and approached a wide-eyed Private Lipton.

“Murray, we’ve got a ton of work to do,” Tom said softly. “Get hold of the Camp Gruber officer of the day—damn, it would have to be Sunday—and tell him we’ve had a death in the camp.” He put his hand on the young soldier’s shoulder. “Yes, Murray. It’s Plutarco. I’m sorry but you’re going to have to be strong now. I’m counting on you. Tell Gruber that there is no emergency, but we are going to need a burial

detail down here right away. Tomorrow would be good. Then try to find Major Appleton and tell him what happened. He'll be at the B.O.Q. most likely. He was planning to come down tomorrow anyway. Then call Connie—Lieutenant Ballard—she'll be at Miss Garland's house, and ask her to come right over. Ballotti's in bad shape, hands are ripped to shreds; he's going to need stitches. I will also need her to determine cause of death, although that will probably be a formality." When Lipton didn't move, Tom stopped pacing and leaned onto the desk, his face only inches away from the younger man. "Look at me, Murray. You're going to be fine. Now get cracking."

He turned back to the men at the fireplace. "Thank you for coming, Sheriff. Mister Hamby? I can't say I expected to see you here today." He stared at Hamby's bruised and tear-stained face. "What happened to you?" Hamby did not respond, he merely remained hunched over in the leather chair. "No offense, Sheriff, but why did you bring Mister Hamby out here?"

"I wasn't sure I should, to be honest," Grayson replied. "But I'd already gotten the call to come over to Mister Hamby's about a stolen car, and when he told me the whole story, I kinda figured the two were connected. And Mister Hamby begged me to come along. Said he needed to talk to you. Right, Mister Hamby?"

"Oh, Lieutenant Gregory, this is just so damned awful." As he spoke, Hamby would glance fleetingly up at Tom, then back down at his hands, afraid of the truth, but more afraid not to tell it. "I asked the Sheriff if I could come along because I thought I should warn you, but now this..." He turned his head slightly. "I'm afraid Richard has done something bad, something really bad."

It took Tom a second to remember that Richard was Skeeter's real name. And even though the camp was Army property and Plutarco was an Army prisoner, Tom decided to let Sheriff Grayson handle things for the time being. "What do you think, Sheriff?"

The lawman's anger flashed briefly. "I think it's a little damned late for that warning, Mister Hamby, and I need to get busy, too." He looked toward Private Lipton who was animatedly talking on the telephone. "I don't want to break in on Army business, but I got to get hold of the Highway Patrol. There's a chance your son might still be in the state, sir. I'll call it in on my car radio. And while I'm out in the car, you might want to fill the Lieutenant in on what happened at your house last night."

Tom sat down in the chair opposite Hamby, touched by the other man's obvious anguish. "Are you okay, Mister Hamby? Can I get you some coffee or water?"

Tears had returned to Hamby's deep-set eyes. "Not right now, Lieutenant, thank you. I need to get this off my chest before I do what I usually do and try to bluster my way out of it." His voice sounded so defeated that Tom felt it was unlikely that Hamby would try to bluster his way out of much else for the rest of his life.

Hamby began, "Skeeter came in late last night with those ignorant Agee boys, all three of them drunk as skunks. I could see the twins sitting in the car, passing a bottle back and forth. Skeeter was swigging from a bottle of beer, and I noticed his knuckles were all skinned up and bleeding. I asked him if they'd been in a fight and he said no, it was just true-blue Americans striking a blow for freedom or some such nonsense. Then he said to give him a hundred dollars, 'cause they needed to take a little trip."

Hamby's voice rose. "Well, I blew up and told him to give me the keys to the car and to get upstairs and go to bed before I took a belt to him. He just laughed in a way I never heard before and started pushing me with his fingers in my chest, over and over. I kept backing up and then I tripped over a hassock, and fell on the floor. He just stood over me and laughed again and said hell, I wasn't even as much fun as that old Dago. Then he said don't bother to get up, he knew right where there was a tin box with three hundred dollars in my roll-top. I was furious by this time and I said something like over my dead body and he said well, that's a thought, and he hit me with his beer bottle. Then I guess I passed out. When I woke up, Skeeter, the money and the car were all gone. I suppose I should have called the Sheriff right then and there, but I was so humiliated, I just went upstairs and went to sleep." He looked deeply into Tom's eyes, hoping to find forgiveness. "I am still humiliated, Lieutenant, and so sorry. Oh God, I am so sorry. I think he might have killed that man."

Sheriff Grayson returned and stood in front of the fireplace. "Well, I got ahold of the Highway Patrol and gave them a description of your car and license number, but to be honest, with three hundred dollars and more than twelve hours head start, they're probably long gone by this time. It would be blind luck to find them now, unless they're dumb

enough to come back. And Mister Hamby, forgive me for saying this, but your son has a reputation for being mean, not dumb. That's the last you'll see of him, I'm afraid."

Early the next morning, Tom and Connie huddled together over coffee at the V.F.W. hall, silently searching for answers in each other's eyes. Ennio Venturini and the other bakers had just been driven back to camp, leaving Tom and Connie alone for a few minutes before the women began their shift at nine. For the first time since the prisoners' arrival there were no pastries, as a mark of respect for Plutarco.

"So what does all this mean, Tom?"

"Well, there will be an official inquiry, of course, and I'm going to have to write Rob up, I'm afraid. If he was career, a letter like that might hurt him, but right now Rob feels so bad, a letter of reprimand is the last thing on his mind."

"I didn't mean about Plutarco, poor old soul. I meant, what does Italy's surrender hold for us?"

"That's what we were talking about at Camp Gruber over the weekend. Everything's kind of up in the air, for a month at least. Then a lot is going to be up to the prisoners, or whatever we're going to call them. Major Appleton will be here in a few hours...."

"Oh, my dear sweet, dumb Lieutenant Gregory. I really love you. So what does this mean for *us*, Tom and Connie?"

Tom clasped both her hands in his, and was quiet again for a moment. "I'm going to answer that just as soon as I wake up from this dream. You love me? You really love me? You astonish me, you know that? You've never said anything to me even remotely that intimate before. I just assumed the whole subject matter of love and marriage was off limits. Before you take it back or try to joke your way out of it, let me hastily add that I love you too, more than I ever imagined possible." He pulled both of her hands to his face, locked in her gaze. "Whatever the future holds, I want to spend every single minute of it with you. I love you, Connie Ballard, and I want to marry you. Will you marry me?"

"Well, let me think about it—yes. Poor me. I fell in love with you the first minute I saw you on that bus, doggone it. Remember when I sat down and told you I wouldn't marry you? That was precisely the moment I knew I had to, just had to. Hoisted on my own jokester petard. Heck yes, I'll marry you."

Pulling her mouth gently to his, most of Tom ceased to exist at that moment, imploding into lips, fingertips and fragrances—layer after layer of fragrances that finally settled on the deep and enormously satisfying Essence of Connie. He wanted to breathe and taste this essence forever, and since time had stopped for Tom, forever didn't seem so remote. Finally he opened his eyes, only to be met with Connie's brown and gold-flecked eyes staring back in wide-eyed wonder. The kiss ended in a burst of laughter.

"Whoa, Miss Nelly Bly," Connie breathed, still only inches from his face. "Can you imagine how good that'll be when we finally get the hang of it?"

"Well, my darling, let's hope we get the time to get the hang of it. Our world right now is uncharted territory. The status of the Italians is definitely going to change, but how is anybody's guess. It's possible the Army might close the camp. And if they do, Lord knows where I'll be stationed, or what I'll be doing."

Just then the front door swung open and Oklahoma Garland came literally running into the V.F.W. hall. "Is it true, Tom? Is it true?" she shouted.

Tom kissed Connie tenderly on the lips and joked, "Yes, it is, Oklahoma, but I had no idea the word would get out so quickly. Connie Ballard and I are getting married." He smiled at the stunned editor.

"I need to sit down," Oklahoma said. "I was just listening to Don McNeil's *Breakfast Club*, as always, and they broke in with a special bulletin. Washington is forming some kind of Italian force within the Army, and the Italians won't be prisoners of war anymore? Tom, I don't get it. Does that mean Vito is going to be sent away? I should be happy, I know, and I am, I am, but I'm just so confused."

Tom stood and put his arm around his friend. "I'm sorry I teased you, Oklahoma. I know how important Vito has become in your life. Vito's not going anywhere, at least not right away, and he's not going back to Italy for a long, long time, I'm afraid. I've known for a couple of days, but I had to wait for the official announcement of the formation of the Italian Service Units. This will be good for Vito, believe me. War *with* Italy is over, but war *in* Italy is not, not by a long shot." He led Oklahoma back to the table, where Connie wrapped her in a sisterly embrace. Tom continued, "Mussolini still has 50,000 soldiers and he's

formed a puppet government under Hitler. There is still plenty of fighting going on all over Italy right this minute, and there's talk of a German-Italian counteroffensive in the spring. Look, why don't you come to the camp with Connie and me? We're going to have a short memorial for Plutarco, then Major Appleton is going to explain to the men what has happened and what's in store. Dora Clark is going to hold down the fort here."

The three of them walked out to Tom's coupe, Tom in the middle, his arms around both women. "And Oklahoma, I wasn't teasing about the other thing. Connie and I are getting married. Right, Connie?"

"That's right, dear."

Oklahoma Garland stopped dead in her tracks and leaned around Tom to get a good look at Connie. "That's right, dear? That's right, dear? Okay, that's it. The three of us are saved. Hell has officially frozen over."



United States Army regulations strictly forbade the display or possession of an Italian flag at any P.O.W. camp, but Pete Patterson brought a tri-color from the restaurant anyway to drape over Plutarco's hastily-constructed coffin. Pete had wanted to bring the priest from St. Mary's over, but he was in Wewoka at a serviceman's funeral.

As he watched the men file quietly into the camp auditorium, Tom said, "Don't worry about not having a priest, Pete. Murray and the men have selected some appropriate music for the memorial, and I've spoken to Mister Pensotti and asked if I might say a few words in Plutarco's memory. In honor of Plutarco, and with the tutoring of Vito, I'm going to try to address the men in Italian."

"Have the prisoners heard about the Italian Service Unit and the fact that they can't go home?" Pete asked.

"Of course, the radio stations are full of it, but Rob said that outside of a burst of applause in one of the barracks and a fistfight in another, the camp has been real quiet, everyone just too confused and sad to make heads or tails of it yet. I've told Pensotti to keep the men in the auditorium after the memorial to hear from Major Appleton, who will try to clear everything up."

"What about you, Tom? You going to be okay?"

Tom smiled and shrugged. "It's funny in a way. The prisoners don't have any control over their own destiny, but they do have power over mine."

Tom turned to Murray Lipton, already seated at the piano. "All right, Private Lipton, let's begin, if you please."

Connie, Oklahoma Garland, Vito D'Amico and Gino Ballotti, both arms bandaged and in slings, joined Pete and Tom in the front row near the piano. Behind the draped coffin stood four members of the men's

chorus, including young Angelo Festa. Murray began with some Bach masses, and their quiet grace echoed across the hushed and somber hall.

Connie whispered, “Now I understand what ‘thunderous silence’ means.”

Murray continued with selections from Chopin, Brahms and Mozart, then the men sang three pieces from the *Verdi Requiem*: “*Recordare*”, “*Dies Irae*” and “*Sanctus*.” Then Angelo stepped forward and again sang “*Ave Maria*.” This was followed by a few minutes of silence.

At last, Tom rose and stood before the coffin, facing the men. With Vito’s help, Tom had pretty much memorized his opening remarks, and felt surprisingly calm and self-assured. He had been polishing his Italian with Vito for almost six months now, and he felt ready and glad he could speak in Plutarco’s native tongue, today of all days.

“*Signori*,” Tom began quietly. The prisoners, who were already quiet, now sat in stunned silence. It was the first time the camp commander had ever uttered a word of Italian, as far as any of them except Vito knew, and it added another layer of uncertainty to what was already unfolding as one of the most confusing days in their lives.

In Italian, Tom said, “Gentlemen, I ask your forgiveness if I speak your language poorly. I have been studying with Mister D’Amico for some months now, but I have much to learn of the language of my grandfather. I want to honor Plutarco in his own tongue, and besides, could my Italian be any worse than his brave, but fractured English?”

There was a murmur of laughter from the men, a welcome release of tension.

“We have come together this afternoon, I mean this morning, to pay tribute to our friend and colleague, Plutarco Tomasino.” (Tom had been forced to look at the official records to discover Plutarco’s last name. Even his friend Gino wasn’t sure.) “Some of you knew Plutarco in North Africa as a soldier, but most of you, just as I myself, knew him only as a prisoner of war. But Plutarco never seemed a prisoner somehow, a happy warrior whose feet were too big for his boots and whose heart was too big for fences or—what’s the word, Vito—despair.” Vito nodded proudly. “Plutarco was a friend to all, a man whose, how do you say, broken smile repaired our souls. God has placed a Plutarco in every town in this world to remind us that the simple grace of love and honesty is what makes life worth living.

“Plutarco was a prisoner of war, and now he is gone, but he was not a casualty of war. He was a casualty of evil, and evil has no season, no borders, no national flags.” He gestured toward Oklahoma Garland. “The fine people of Weleetka are made just as sad by this tragedy as are all of us here at camp, soldiers and men alike. The people of this village have made us welcome in every way you can imagine—playing your football and their Indian ball games, coming here each week to teach English and read you books. They have even entrusted their children to your care to learn to play musical instruments, sing opera, many things. Many of the townspeople feel guilty because it is believed that it was one of theirs who caused Plutarco’s death. But they should not feel guilty. And neither should any of you. There are some of us here who are thinking, ‘If only I had done this, if only I had done that, Plutarco might still be alive.’ Please do not blame yourself. And please do not blame this town, this country or this war. You know there was no room for blame or hatred in Plutarco’s mighty heart, and although that heart is stilled, let us dedicate ourselves to keeping a small part of Plutarco alive in our own hearts by behaving as he would have us do.”

Tom made a half turn toward the coffin. “Gentlemen, please stand and join me in a salute to our fallen friend, Private Plutarco Tomasino.”

At the agreed-upon signal of Tom’s salute, the burial detail, which had been standing at the rear of the auditorium with Major Frank Appleton, silently marched forward, folded the flag—which they presented to Gino Ballotti—shouldered the casket and withdrew.

Tom lowered his hand with the exaggerated slowness of all military funeral salutes. Switching back to English, he said, “Now, gentlemen, please take your seats again. As you may have heard on the radio, with the surrender of the Italian government, our own government is going to offer you the opportunity to join a new division of our Army, the Italian Service Unit. Although Hitler makes it impossible for you to return to Italy, things are going to get much better for many of you.”

There was a smattering of applause, followed by a few cat-calls.

Raising his hands, Tom said, “Now, gentlemen, the war is over outside. Let’s not start it again in here. There is much for you to know and much for you to consider. Here to explain your current situation and your future is Major Frank Appleton, commander of all prisoner of war camps in Oklahoma. Mister D’Amico, will you translate for us? Major Appleton.”

The thin, bespectacled Major Appleton was looking more and more like a college professor, Tom thought, although he doubted any professor had ever worn such a highly-starched outfit. It looked as if you could slice bread with the Major's collar.

"Gentlemen," Major Appleton said in his flat Wisconsin accent. "Some of you may have already been aware that your King Victor Immanuel sent orders removing Mussolini as head of the Italian government a few months ago. But, with all due respect, the King had no real authority and no army. Mussolini ignored him, and frankly, because our soldiers and those of England were fighting and dying on the beaches of Anzio and other places, so did we. Mussolini and his new fascist government simply removed to Lombardy and continued fighting as a puppet government under Hitler."

Appleton removed his glasses and cleaned them with a handkerchief that appeared as ironed and starched as the rest of his uniform. "I guess if I was sitting in your place right now, I'd want to know if I could go home, and when. The answer, sadly for you, is no, you cannot go home and you may not be able to do so for a long time." There were groans, sighs and a few angry shouts. One of the newer men cried in near-perfect English, "If there is no war, how can there be prisoners of war?"

"It's a valid question," Appleton said. "The fact of the matter is, we couldn't send you home now even if we wanted to. Mussolini has invited the Nazi army to protect his so-called government, and as we speak, German soldiers control Milan, Lakes Como and Garda, and the Italian Alps. And because Hitler considers northern Italy strategically important, we may be at war there for some time to come. Also—and I don't expect a show of hands—there may be some of you here still loyal to the Italian Socialist Government. We would not blame you if you were, and in that case you are technically still prisoners of war."

"No, not us," many of the men shouted in a mixture of Italian and English. "Down with Mussolini. Down with *Il Duce*. *Vive America*."

"Quiet, gentlemen, quiet. The American government wants to be fair, so we will be offering you a choice. You will each be asked to sign an oath of loyalty to the government of the United States. Those of you who, for family reasons or loyalty to friends, are unwilling to sign such an oath, will be transferred to the Italian prisoner of war camp in Hereford, Texas, to serve out the duration of the war precisely as you are doing here today.

"But we believe most of you are citizens of Italy, not citizens of Mussolini, and we intend to honor that. For those of you willing to pledge your loyalty to America—which, because of the new treaty, is the same today as pledging your loyalty to your own country—our government has formed a new branch of our armed forces, especially for you. We offer you the opportunity to join the Italian Service Unit. As members of the Italian Service Unit, you will perform duties essential to the war effort: working as hospital orderlies, ground maintenance crews on Army bases; in fact, work such as you are currently doing here at the commissary and bakery. You will continue to live in supervised locations such as Camp Chigger Lake, but as you work hard and continue to gain the trust of the military and townspeople, you will gain many privileges not allowed to prisoners of war. And you will be paid for your work. You will, in fact, be paid the same as a private in our own Army."

"Eight dollars a week—whoopee," muttered Murray Lipton, low enough so only Connie and Oklahoma could hear him.

Aldo Pensotti rose and held up his hand like one of his own students. "Excuse me, sir, but will we still be required to wear these prison suits?"

Tom touched Major Appleton's arm. "May I?" Appleton nodded in relief.

"No, Mister Pensotti, your chain gang uniforms will be a thing of the past. I know how much that grieves you." That brought the first real laugh to the auditorium all day. Every prisoner in camp knew how much the *Maestro* despised his black denim uniform with the white-painted P.O.W. brand on the jacket and pants legs. Tom and Sergeant Hare had often chuckled and winked at how the otherwise fastidious Pensotti would get mud or dirt on the front of his pants, obscuring the white painted P and W. "Every member of the Italian Service Units will wear the same uniform of an American enlisted man—without any insignia, of course. The only difference will be a small green patch on your arm with the word 'Italy' stitched in white."

Vito D'Amico directed his question to Major Appleton. "Pardon me, Major, another question, if I may? Over the past months, many of us have formed strong bonds of friendship, both within the camp and with the townspeople." Try as hard as he might, he simply couldn't help cutting his eyes toward Oklahoma, who immediately ducked her head like a lovesick teen. "Is it possible that we could continue to stay right here as an Italian Service Unit?"

Major Appleton laughed. “With an accent like that, I thought you’d be asking me what the Dodgers’ chances would be next year. Yes, if enough of you decide to join the I.S.U. and want to remain here, that will be fine. We intend to keep the commissary and bakery going in any case, and there’s no reason why you couldn’t stay in Weleetka. That is, if Lieutenant Gregory and Sergeant Hare are willing to stay and supervise you.” Tom looked over at Connie Ballard as if he had just received a reprieve from the governor, and nodded vigorously.

“Okay, gentlemen. Take some time to think about it. If you decide to sign the loyalty oaths, we need them in the next thirty days. Are there any more questions before I go?”

Moro Morino the postman stood. “When we join can we then for please have the boogie-woogie jitterbug dance with the ladies?”



“May I speak with you for a minute, Lieutenant Gregory?”

Tom was sitting on the stone ledge in front of the administration building’s fireplace, his regular mid-winter perch, drinking coffee and reading the latest issue of the Weleetka *American*. He looked up and patted the spot beside him. “Sure, Vito, pull up a piece of fireplace. I’ve been meaning to talk with you anyway, find out how it’s going with the men signing up for the Italian Service Unit. Are we going to have enough sign-ups to keep Chigger Lake open?”

“Mostly blue skies there, Lieutenant. A couple dozen of the new men, some of the hard core fascists, say they won’t sign because it would be treason. But here’s the funny part. One of those guys stood up the other night and made a speech about how Mussolini was going to launch this big spring counteroffensive and when they retake Italy, all of us who sign the loyalty oath will be stuck in the United States for the rest of our lives. Next thing he knew, we were all clapping, whistling and stomping our feet. Barbieri shouted that if he’d known that, he would have signed up the day he got here. We laughed the other guy right out of the place. So we’re staying. Are you?”

“Yeah. I like it here. I like small towns, I like the people here with their Okie sense of humor, and I know this may sound strange under the circumstances, but I really like you guys. You’ve taught me so much about my own heritage—the language, the culture, opera. When this war is over, I promise I’ll come see you at the opera in Verona. And you know what, Vito? I’ll bring Connie—Lieutenant Ballard—with me. Maybe for a honeymoon. We’re going to get married.”

“*Così va bene*, Lieutenant. Congratulations. It was no secret around here how the two of you felt about each other, but pleasant news is

always welcome news. And speaking of no secrets, I have a pretty good idea that you and Lieutenant Connie know that I have a crush on Miss Garland, and I think she might feel the same way.”

“Without betraying a trust, I can tell you that your hunch is a good one,” Tom said. “Is that what you came to talk to me about?”

“Yes, it is,” Vito said, now serious. “I’m thirty-six years old, Lieutenant. I may not be the best-looking guy in the world, but like a lot of men, I’ve probably fallen in love a thousand times. Nothing serious, usually for a week, sometimes for only one special moonlit night. You know how it is. But I’ve never had that big love, that thunderbolt. And with building my career and taking care of my mother, maybe I wasn’t the best catch myself. We have a saying in my family that for every pot there is a lid; but I was beginning to have my doubts, especially when Pig Eyes conscripted me into the army. And then I get taken prisoner. Who knew that my lid, my thunderbolt, would be living in Weleetka? I can hardly believe it myself.”

Tom tapped the newspaper gently as if it were a surrogate for its editor. “Oklahoma Garland is one of the most capable and talented people I’ve ever met, Vito, man or woman. She’s a brilliant writer, a very cultured woman. Connie says she’s so smart, she’s like a walking ‘Information, Please.’ I’m guessing that the only reason she’s still single is she just wouldn’t settle for second-best. Can you imagine her getting married to someone like Mister Hamby? When you started singing opera and when she learned all about your love and understanding of classical music and literature, I think you kind of swept her off her feet. Although Lord knows why. You still sound like one of the Dead End Kids to me.”

D’Amico laughed. “Yeah, and if she ever got to Italy, she’d know I sing like a third-rate gondolier. But what I may lack in talent, I make up for in moxie. I love that woman, Lieutenant, and I’m going to marry her somehow. And frankly, well, that’s what I wanted to discuss.”

Tom shook his head. “Vito, you couldn’t marry her now, no matter what. You aren’t a prisoner of war anymore, but you’re a long way from being able to do something like that. You can’t even go into town without an escort.”

“Yes, I understand that. Aldo and I have been reading all the reports and orders Major Appleton left with Private Lipton. We think they are fair and probably meant to protect us as much as the community. But it’s the escort part we’re talking about. I may be new around here, but as I

understand it, before you get married, it’s customary to have at least one date. So Miss Oklahoma and I were thinking, well ... we were wondering if you and Lieutenant Connie might like to ... well you know, have a double date? We could maybe go to a movie or something.”

“Moxie isn’t the half of it,” Tom chuckled. “So the two of you have been conspiring behind my back, huh? Well, I kind of figured something like this was in the air. Connie said that Oklahoma was wondering aloud the other night if when you guys got your new uniforms, you could come into town for special occasions. Okay, that will be the carrot. The sooner you men get your paperwork in, the sooner you get your new uniforms. Mister Pensotti can breathe a sigh of relief, and in recognition of you acting as my official interpreter, Connie and I will be honored to accompany you to a movie. And your luck is running your way. Thanksgiving week-end the Royal is finally getting that new Bogey movie, *Sahara*. It’s supposed to be one of the best movies of the year, maybe even as good as *Casablanca*.”

“*Sahara*?” said a now slumping Vito D’Amico. “I heard about that one on Lux Radio Theater about a month ago. Oh, well.” He stood and slapped his arms against his legs in a sign of resignation. “I wait five years to actually see an American movie in a real theater, and I get Humphrey Bogart in North Africa. Lucky me.”

It was pure coincidence that the thirty-eight prisoners who refused to sign the loyalty papers were shipped off to Texas on the same train that brought the new I.S.U. uniforms. Shuffling desultorily in their black dungarees under the watchful (and heavily armed) eyes of the M.P.s, many of the departing P.O.W.s might have had reason to regret their decision. Their status as prisoners sank from unlucky draftees to willing fascists, and they were viewed now with as much suspicion as the Nazi officers in their high-security camp in northern Oklahoma near the town of Alva. When they got to Hereford, Texas, they would soon learn that the provisions of the Geneva Convention that protected—some would say coddled—them could be flexible, and more harshly interpreted.

For the newest members of the newest branch of the Army, however, life was about to take a significant leap forward.

“Take a look at these overcoats, will you?” Wally Pipp shouted, showing off the new I.S.U. uniform. The wool coat, a khaki version of

the Navy pea coat with its six-button double-breasted front, was in fact the latest issue, going out to every American serviceman. “Hey, I need one of these, okay, Sergeant?” He held his arms out and gave a half turn in his abysmal imitation of a fashion model.

“Absolutely, my dear Private Pipp,” Sergeant Jesse Hare replied. As he and the other American soldiers began loading crate after crate of clothing onto the waiting trucks, Hare raised his hand and gave the Boy Scout three-fingered salute. “It is my solemn pledge to you, as an American fighting man—well, in your case, soldier at least—that I will keep you as well-dressed as your Italian counterparts. I can’t guarantee you’ll eat as well ... oops, you’re the cook. I forgot.”

Overcoats and underwear were the only brand new clothing the men would receive. All the other items of the uniform were used—clean and serviceable, but often patched. The boots were reconditioned and not of the newer lightweight G.I. issue, but still better than most enlisted men had seen in the Italian army.

No Italians had been assigned to help with the loading. Tom Gregory had determined that the men at the camp would never again be seen in the humiliating P.O.W. uniforms, an announcement he made to shouts of joy and immediate talks of bonfires. The Italians were at that moment forming lines according to size, jostling and laughing in stark contrast to the humble procession they formed when they had exchanged their rags for black denim six months earlier. To Private Lipton, who was putting the finishing touches on the inventory control sheets held on his ever-present clipboard, the virtually unguarded camp had the air of a children’s birthday party.

American soldiers lugged the dozens of crates into the auditorium, each new crate bringing exclamations of awe and wonder as it was cracked open and its contents revealed. Sergeant Hare set up assembly-line rows of tables, and each man’s arms were filled to groaning with GI-issue underwear, socks, shirts, trousers, web belts, boots, overcoats, even the same garrison caps as regular enlisted men. When they got to the end of the line, Lieutenant Luke added six oval fabric patches to each man’s pile, tucking three in each boot.

The men, who were holding their piles of clothing together with their chins, seemed to be in some kind of dream state. Most of them had never seen so much clothing in one place before, and unlike the old P.O.W. uniforms, these uniforms bespoke dignity as well as basic comfort.

As the men at the front of the lines started to wobble back to their barracks, Sergeant Hare stepped in front of them.

“Now hold it right there, soldiers,” he barked. “D’Amico, get up here and translate. Okay, you men, you noticed I called you soldiers, ‘cause that’s what you are now. Before, you were prisoners, and I had to handle you with kid gloves because of all those Geneva thingies, but now you are soldiers and I am your sergeant, and you already know what sergeants can be like.”

Tom Gregory walked into the packed auditorium while Vito D’Amico was finishing his translation. As with any translation, there were a few seconds of delay before the men broke into appreciative laughter.

Tom laughed with the men. “You should believe him,” Tom said in Italian. “I’ve seen him in the morning before his coffee. He can be the Devil himself.” There was more laughter, but Tom noticed Jesse Hare’s uncertain look, so he quickly switched back to English. “Please carry on, Sergeant Hare.”

“Thanks, Lieutenant. You still with me, D’Amico? Okay, here’s the deal. As soon as you get back to your barracks, you will find that the Army has thoughtfully provided you with needles and thread. Come up here a second, Private Pipp.” Hare took one of the green I.S.U. service patches out of his pocket. He held the small patch, with the word “Italy” stitched in white, against the upper left arm of Pipp’s overcoat. “Using that same needle and thread, you will sew this little green patch on everything you own except your underwear, and I’m still thinking about that. If you get finished with your sewing in a timely manner, Lieutenant Gregory has planned a special treat for you, right, Lieutenant?”

“That’s right, Sergeant Hare,” Tom said, careful to stay in English. “I have asked my friend Pete Patterson to help Private Pipp prepare a real feast, including pizza pies and cannoli. And for one night only, Pete will provide every man with two glasses of his very own famous red wine.” There was a cheer from the men. Tom continued, “Then, if you behave, I will show you a brand new Betty Grable movie. If you do not behave, I will show you *Bambi* again, along with a short film on venereal disease.”



Tom considered himself a strong man, but he still needed both hands to open his car door against the wind. Grabbing his service cap in one hand, he was about to make a dash for the newspaper's front door when he saw Oklahoma Garland standing at the big plate glass window, smiling and vigorously waving him off. She circled her arm in a pantomime for Tom to go around to the side entrance.

He got back into his mud-spattered car and drove around to the big sliding door where they brought in the heavy newsprint rolls. The door was open just a crack, and he athletically slipped through.

Floyd was typing intently on the pachinko-clattering Linotype, his back to Tom. He gave the keyboard a final punch, lifted both hands in the air like a prizefighter, and spun around on his stool.

"One hundred, Miss Garland, one hundred," he said triumphantly as the last Linotype slugs slid into place. "Oh, hi, Lieutenant. Didn't hear you come in."

"Not surprised," Tom answered. "What with the tornado blowing outside and that god-awful machine in here, I'd be surprised if you could hear a freight train. What does it mean when you shout 'one hundred'?"

Oklahoma came around the corner and patted Floyd's shoulder. "Good work, Floyd." She turned to Tom and said, "'One hundred' is what Linotype operators yell when they finish setting a story with no mistakes. Sure makes it easier on us editors who have to stand over the galleys reading upside-down and backwards looking for typos. So how you doing?"

"Couldn't be better, but I think I'm actually still getting used to Indian Territory. Doesn't anything ever happen halfway in this state? Last week it was the mud, and now this gentle zephyr." He gestured

outside with his thumb. "And what is it with that mud? I'm still trying to get that red glue out of my clothes. Are you sure this isn't Land of the Red Mud instead of Land of the Red Man?"

"I'm sorry to have sent you around to the tradesmen's entrance, but we have to keep that door open a little bit or the fumes from the lead would make us both drunk as skunks," Oklahoma said. "If you had opened that front door, you could have created a wind tunnel that might have sucked all of us out into the street. Glad you're here. We're just putting the finishing touches on my editorial about the new Italian Service Unit, and I'd like you to read it."

Floyd stood and walked over to a teapot perched precariously on the edge of the lead vat. He shook some instant Postum into his mug and filled it with hot water. "Mmm, I like this stuff better than coffee anymore."

Oklahoma laughed. "That makes one of us. I imagine you'll have the whole Postum company to yourself once the war is over."

"That'd suit me fine, Miss Garland." Tom wondered if Floyd had ever addressed her by her first name. Stirring his Postum with what looked suspiciously like a Popsicle stick, Floyd sat back down on the little Linotype stool. "You know, Lieutenant, your question about red mud and red men isn't so far-fetched. Did you know that in the Creek creation stories, my people all lived in the mud at first? Then we climbed up on the back of a giant turtle and he pulled us out. A big old eagle came down and flapped its wings and dried everything out, which let us walk on the land. But if the mud was like this red cleechy we got nowadays, it probably stuck with us. That's how we got this noble color, I'm guessing. Some of the stories also say that when the wind is blowing like it is today, it's that great eagle drying out some more of my people. I sure hope so; I could use a little help."

"That eagle story used to scare the wits out of me when I was a youngster," Oklahoma remarked. "I figured if its wings were that big, how big were its beak and talons? Whenever I had fever dreams, that's what I saw." She stopped to look out the window herself. "It looks like you're going to get your wish, Floyd. Help is on the way: Connie's back from Oklahoma City. Everybody grab hold of something, here she comes."

Connie Ballard burst through the door with a personal dust devil in tow, scattering papers and sending a calendar flying off the wall. She shut the door as quickly and flamboyantly as possible, then in her best

imitation of W.C. Fields as Mister Micawber, she announce loudly, "Madam, I am arrived." She started picking up papers. "Jeez. Did I do all this? Hello everybody. I just blew in from Kansas. Anybody seen my little doggie? Answers to the name of Toto."

Tom was already across the room and swinging her in an embrace worthy of a square dance. "Welcome back, honey. We missed you."

"Hello, Tom darling. I was on my way to see you next."

"How's your father?"

"Oh, Daddy's fine. Just indigestion. That can happen after three orders of ribs. But the doctor still scolded him, saying that much barbeque was just like eating heart attack on a plate. He also said he wanted Daddy to lose thirty pounds. Daddy said he wanted to learn to speak French and dance the tango, but none of those three was very likely. He's so funny."

Oklahoma asked, "Do you think he'll be able to come to the Garland Thanksgiving Tradition? That's what my brother Dale used to call it."

"No, Daddy and the other men in his Sunday School class have their own Thanksgiving tradition, what they call Turkey on Tough Street, where they feed the folks down at the Salvation Army mission. He's been doing it for years; wouldn't miss it. He says it reminds him just how close he came a couple of times to being on the receiving end."

"Well, he'll be missed. I sure hope you're coming, Tom. You are the key element in my holiday plan."

"Well, you know I'd love to, and I've been counting on it, but things just got a little complicated. Private Lipton's father is coming into town. Sent a wire saying he really wants to see me. You remember me talking about Julius Lipschitz, don't you Connie? Great guy. He and his wife took Pete and me to see *Oklahoma* when we were in New York. He and Murray have invited me to have Thanksgiving dinner with them at the Petroleum Club in Tulsa."

"Nonsense," Oklahoma said. "They're both coming here for Thanksgiving dinner, and that's that. Thanksgivings are for homes and families. They're for being too rowdy, and eating too much, and loosening your belt buckle and taking a nap. You can't do that at the Petroleum Club. We've got more than enough room, and Joseph Atubby is holding two twenty-pounders back for me just like he does every year. So it's settled. I've already invited Pete and that cute little Mary Beth Devine.

Tom, old friend, I was hoping you'd be willing to escort one of the newest members of the Army Italian Service Unit, Mister Vito D'Amico. I thought we could all have dinner and then go down and see that movie like we talked about."

"Ugh and double ugh, and I'm not speaking Chickasaw," Connie said. "Daddy took me to see that thing Sunday. What is it about men and war movies? It's just Humphrey Bogart and a bunch of smelly soldiers driving all over the Sahara shooting Germans. Not exactly my idea of a date movie, Oklahoma. Of course, come to think of it, when Tom and I had our first date we almost went to see *They Died With Their Boots On* and that didn't turn out so bad, did it, hon?"

"Well, I'm convinced," Tom said. "We can always go to the picture show any time. How about we just stay around the house, let our belts out a notch and listen to the Army-Navy game?"

"Triple ugh, but okay."

Thanksgiving morning broke crisp as a dry twig. Men in sweaters were lazily raking and burning leaves, more to have something to do and build up an appetite than accomplish anything. Fragrant tendrils of smoke from the leaves and fireplaces joined low-hanging clouds to form a dome over the little town, curiously quieting and amplifying sound at the same time. It was what Floyd called "a listening day," when even the smallest sound seemed to have been placed there with some grand purpose.

Tom could hear the echoing ring of someone chopping firewood blocks away. Even the blue jays seemed to be trying to cooperate, spacing their lonely cries against the ever-present background thrum of the little grasshopper oil pumps on the edge of town. If a Currier and Ives lithograph had a soundtrack, Tom thought, this would be it.

He and Floyd stood in front of the duplex tossing a football back and forth, not saying anything, just listening to nothing and thinking of turkey legs past. Tom was looking forward to this Thanksgiving dinner, not just because of his perpetual young man's hunger, but also because it would be the first time he had been inside the Garland home. Connie had been living at the Garland place for more than six months, and Tom would often walk her home from the V.F.W. hall a few blocks away, but she never invited him inside. Occasionally they would sit on the big front porch swing, but that was as close as he came.

"These will just be reasons twenty through twenty-five why you will know for certain that I'm nuts," Connie had told him one evening as they rocked on the swing, her head tucked in the crook of his arm, patting his chest absentmindedly as a mother would an infant. "The fact is, the more I fall in love with you, the less likely you are to step through that door, at least when it's just the two of us. If Oklahoma is willing, maybe you can carry me across it on our honeymoon, but that won't happen until this stupid war is over." She held her hand steady on his heart and looked pleadingly into Tom's eyes. "Please try to understand. I told you already that I spent half of my life being my own scolding mother. I set impossible standards for myself and others, I know. And you deserve to know why."

"You don't have to tell me," Tom said gently.

"If I thought I had to, I wouldn't. You know that, darlin'." She continued her steady gaze, as if she was ready to bound into the woods at the hint of disapproval. "I told you already about my mother's alcoholism, her bouts with the bottle. But I didn't tell you about the other thing. I didn't know you well enough then, and it makes my eyes sting even now. But I want to tell you, Tom. I want to finally put it in words to someone I love, and I can't possibly tell Daddy; not now, not ever. My mother was, let's see how to say this, the female equivalent of Will Rogers. She never met a man she didn't like. It was always about getting drunk, of course. Daddy was out in the oil fields so much. Sometimes it was in honkytonks, sometimes in cars, and sometimes, especially near the end, she'd just give me a quarter and tell me to go to the store for some milk and a candy bar while she discussed something with Mister Jones or Mister Smith. When I came back I could smell the men on her. I was only eleven or twelve and I wasn't supposed to know what that smell was, but I knew. I knew."

She sat up straight, staring into the distance now, putting her laughing face back on. "So when she died, I turned into Miss Goody Two-Shoes, the trustworthy daughter, a virgin and proud of it. I'm not about to change this late in my spinsterhood. If anybody ever saw us walk into this house together, I'd be mortified. So there."

"Thank you, Connie. I'm honored. I've noticed that the things that affect us the most are often the most difficult to put into words. Your virginity is safe with me." Noticing her raised eyebrows, Tom laughed. "Guess I didn't put that into words very well, either. I can wait, darling, I can wait."



When Tom pulled into camp to pick up Vito, he parked next to the longest Lincoln town car he had ever seen, complete with chauffeur.

Tom got out of his suddenly-inadequate coupe and walked up to the elderly black man who was staring straight ahead, drumming his fingers on the steering wheel in time to a song only he could hear. “Good morning. Would you feel more comfortable inside? There’s a nip in the air.”

“That’s very kind of you, sir, but this car has a heater superior to my own at home.”

“If you change your mind, we’ve got a big fireplace and real coffee just inside.”

“Thank you, sir, but I’m very much accustomed to keeping my own company. You know what they say about being a chauffeur: ‘hours of boredom punctuated by minutes of looking for a parking place.’ Thanks anyway.”

“All right, then. Happy Thanksgiving.”

“And to you, sir.”

Tom entered the stone-chimneyed administrative building and was met by the sound of raucous laughter. The diminutive and dapper Julius Lipschitz was standing by the large fireplace wiping tears from his eyes as Vito D’Amico—starched and parade-ready in his new uniform—was making a point, finger in the air. Murray Lipton, equally starched and Brassoed, sat behind his paper-laden desk obviously enjoying the performance. He was the first to spot Tom’s entrance, and much to the Lieutenant’s surprise, stood and snapped off a salute, a skill that Tom was unaware the usually anti-establishment Private possessed. Seeing Lipton’s actions out of the corner of his eye, Vito turned and came to attention, offering his Italian version of a salute. Tom was so surprised he fumbled his own return salute.

“Sit down, gentlemen, please.” Tom walked over to Julius and took the smaller man’s shoulders in both hands, as close to a brotherly embrace as either man could subconsciously accept. “Welcome to Oklahoma, Julius. Did you have a nice trip? You must have, that’s some car.”

“Good morning, Tom, old friend. Please forgive the town car. Like most New Yorkers, I’ve never learned to drive.”

“Well, I’m delighted to see you again. And I must say you bring with you a sense of dignity and decorum that does this place good.” Tom



cocked his head toward the younger Lipton. “That’s the highest level of military protocol I can remember from either one of them.”

Julius smiled. “Private D’Amico was enchanting us with his stories of divas, tenors and other human aberrations. Private D’Amico was the general manager of the Arena Opera in Verona; but you knew that, of course. Private D’Amico, if I may say so, besides being an authority on opera, you may also have a career ahead of you in radio as a comedian. You are a very funny man, sir.”

“*Private D’Amico?*” Tom repeated.

“Uh, yes sir,” Murray Lipton said. “We just got word down from command that every member of the I.S.U. should be referred to as the rank he held in the Italian army, although they won’t wear any insignia.”

“Well, that is a switch.” Tom looked at Vito. “I had been told when you were prisoners of war to call you mister and only refer to officers by their rank. And since you didn’t have any officers—they were all off in Missouri or someplace—I didn’t think any more about it.” He shrugged. “Well, you’re in the Army now, *Private D’Amico*. But how am I going to remember all your ranks?”

Vito laughed. “That shouldn’t be a problem, Lieutenant. We’re all privates, every darn one of us. That’s why we all get along so well, I guess. They peeled off all the noncoms in New York, and we haven’t seen an officer since Benghazi, not that we’re complaining.”

Tom turned back to Julius. “This is all so new to us; we’re still building the airplane even after it’s in the air. Well, gentlemen, it’s turkey time. Would it be all right if we all go in your car, Julius? This will be the first time an Italian Service Unit soldier has been out of Chigger Lake in the new uniforms, and I’d just as soon not make too big a splash at first. So, I was thinking that you might sit up front, Julius, and Murray and I could bracket our prisoner—I mean our private—as we drive through town.” He grinned and clapped Vito on the shoulder in a gesture of camaraderie. “Sorry, Vito, old habits die hard. Speaking of which, if I have to call you *Private D’Amico* for the duration of the war, I’m going to pull my hair out. So is it okay if I call you what I always do?”

Vito D’Amico pulled himself into full attention. “I’m not entirely sure that ‘hey you’ and ‘dumb shit’ are appropriate anymore, sir.”

“What did I tell you?” Julius laughed. “Georgie Jessel doesn’t have better timing, or a better Brooklyn accent.”



When the elegant town car turned into Oklahoma Garland's driveway, it had gathered a small entourage of Weleetka youngsters on foot and bicycles. They were laughing and gawking at what was clearly the largest automobile they had ever seen. When Tom, Vito and Murray got out of the back seat, in their starched long-sleeved uniforms, the children were delighted. The youngsters hastily lined up at the foot of the driveway and offered giggling salutes, some right-handed, some left, that were as respectful as they were playful. All three men returned their salutes, to the boys' continued amusement.

"Thank you, Mister Bishop," Julius Lipschitz said to the chauffeur, then scowled thoughtfully. "Pardon me, Tom, but I was wondering if there was someplace nearby where Mister Bishop could take his meal?"

The black-capped man was standing at the front of the car, one hand resting on the fender. "That won't be necessary, Mister Lipschitz, but thank you for your concern. I have a cousin in Boley just a few miles away who has invited me to take my Thanksgiving dinner with his family. I'll return for you at five, sir." He smiled broadly at the children. "And may I have your permission to give these young soldiers a ride in the Lincoln before I go?"

The four men walked onto the large wrap-around front porch, followed by the sound of happy squeals and slamming car doors. Oklahoma Garland, very pretty in a red braided jacket that looked like it might have originally been designed for the ringmaster of a posh circus, threw open the front door.

"Happy Thanksgiving, gentlemen. Come in please. Mister Lipschitz, thank you so much for joining us today. Tom and Pete have told me about their magical weekend in New York, thanks to you." Then she extended her hand to Vito D'Amico. Although she had practiced this casual encounter dozens of times in the mirror and hadn't blushed once, it was no use. "Happy Thanksgiving, Vito. Your uniform looks splendid." She had practiced using the word "dashing," but lost her nerve at the last minute.

They entered an open and spacious gathering room, with a drawing room on the right, a library with a huge roll-top desk on the left, and directly in front, an enormous dining room with a race-track dining table and twelve chairs.

The warm aromas that settled over the visitors were enough to send a starving man into madness.

Julius Lipschitz breathed deeply. "Ah, some say frankincense, some say myrrh; I say the fragrance for a king is sage, onions and giblet gravy. I would have come to Indian Territory just to savor this moment. Thank you, Miss Garland."

Julius noted a man and woman sitting at the table. "Oh, hello, Pete. *E' bello vederti.*"

"*Bene, Julio!*" Pete laughed. "It's amazing. The only people I can get to speak Italian with me anymore is a Russian from New York. Meet Mary Beth Devine. She teaches English to the men. Is it any wonder they've forgotten their Italian?"

Connie and Floyd emerged from the kitchen, she with a large salad, Floyd with one of the two crusty brown turkeys. Connie, who thought there would be more than enough uniforms already, wore a brown checked shirt-waist dress similar to the one she wore on her first date with Tom in Muskogee.

"Julius Lipschitz, allow me to introduce my fiancée, Lieutenant Connie Ballard," Tom said, then paused. "Wow, I've never used that word in public before. And this is my friend, landlord, Linotype operator, and the man who built Camp Chigger Lake, Floyd Breedlove. He may tell you that he's part Indian, but if he asks you to guess which part, you have our permission to take him out in the backyard and beat him with a stick."

Floyd carefully placed the turkey on the table. "You see how it is, Mister Lipschitz? The subtle discrimination?"

Murray Lipton started to laugh. "It could be worse. You could be one of the lost tribes of Israel."

They gathered around the large dining table. It was covered with a dozen dishes, some traditional, a few, concocted by the adventurous but easily-distracted hostess, bordering on the wacky. Oklahoma Garland readily admitted she had no particular skills in the kitchen, but she loved attempting to recreate some of the award-winning recipes she clipped from *Redbook*, especially if the ingredients were exotic. Her Berry, Berry Orange Parfait Jell-O mold was actually a big hit, but some of the other dishes only a mother, or Vito D'Amico, could love.

"Wow, walnut-garlic cranberry sauce," Vito exclaimed. "It's a culinary aria, Oklahoma, my friend. Pete, this should be right down your alley."

Tom leaned close to Connie and whispered, "Pete's about to get mugged in that alley."

Pete tactfully scooped a Lilliputian dollop of cranberry sauce onto his plate. “It is true I am the garlic gourmet. I could eat it on ice cream. But wait until you taste my new spaghetti sauce. We’ve got a name for it now, and a slogan, too. We’re going to call it ‘Pete’s Big Red Spaghetti Sauce.’ Then the next line says, ‘From Krebs, Oklahoma—Little Italy on the Prairie.’ What do you think?”

“I don’t know about the ‘Little Italy’ part, paesano,” Vito observed. “We were your enemy only a few months ago; it might be a little early for that. I’ve been reading in the Italian-language newspapers from New York that people in other parts of the country are still plenty mad.”

“I’ve been reading the same thing in *Army Times*,” Tom said. “Places like Seattle and Phoenix, where the prisoner of war camps were stuck so far out of sight people weren’t even aware they existed, are seeing Italian Service Unit soldiers in museums and band concerts and stuff, and there’s starting to be a backlash. Some folks are going through the ‘coddled prisoners’ phase we went through six months ago with Hamby. It doesn’t make sense, especially now, but there it is.”

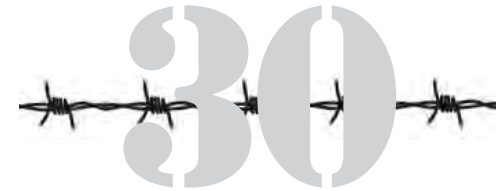
Julius daubed at the side of his mouth with his napkin. “It sounds to me like you gentlemen need a dose of what our advertising people at NBC are calling ‘public relations’.”

“Public relations?” Tom repeated.

“It’s a concerted campaign to extol the virtues of a company, or in your case, a group of people, through word of mouth. Murray has told me of the many worthwhile things you men have done here, Private D’Amico—your help with the harvests, the bakery, the music lessons, your wonderful men’s chorus. But most Americans are ignorant of your accomplishments. And we fear the things we don’t know.” He took a drink of water. “Perhaps I have a way to help your public relations a little, and you can help me in return.”

Vito D’Amico leaned forward excitedly in his chair. “Well, sure, but how can we do that, Mister Lipschitz?”

“By appearing on NBC’s *Camel Cigarettes Cavalcade of Stars* radio show. That’s actually one of the reasons I’m here. Each month we broadcast the show from a different Army base, and I’ve convinced the producers to air our holiday show from Camp Gruber. Are you in?”



Vito D’Amico strode through the front door of the headquarters building. Nobody but Sergeant Jesse Hare seemed to notice the cold air that came in with him.

“Man, here we go again,” Sergeant Hare pouted as he drew his head as far as he could into his wool coat. The fireplace was raging, thanks to Sergeant Hare’s constant stoking, yet Hare was still wearing his coat indoors even after all these months stationed in Weleetka. Everyone else was sitting in shirtsleeves. Tom, whose own coat was on the rack near the front door, thought it actually might be a little too warm inside. It looked cold and miserable outside, however, and he knew that Jesse’s years in Borneo still made him extra-sensitive to the cold.

“Good morning, *Tenente*,” Vito said amiably. “You wanted to see me?”

“Yeah, Vito, some of the producers of the Camp Gruber Christmas show are coming down to the camp, and my telex said they especially wanted to meet you. Probably about the Men’s Chorus.”

“Well, if that’s the case, they ought to be talking to the *Maestro*. It’s his chorus, not mine. I’m just the baritone.”

“I don’t know, but headquarters asked for you specifically. And as you know, our response is to say, ‘Yes sir, please sir, may I have another?’ They’re on their way right now, so stick around.”

Jesse Hare walked to the window by his desk. “Good advice, Lieutenant. That particular line all by itself has earned me my three stripes and a rocker.” His attention focused outside the window, he continued, “I can see your visitors coming up the road now. And if you think Lipton’s father’s car was big, get a load of this baby. Doesn’t anybody remember there’s a war going on?”

Tom ambled slowly onto the administration building porch to greet the guests. Jesse Hare was right. The Packard Phaeton that pulled into the parking space was only slightly smaller than Tom's apartment and cost much more. A burly man in an Alpaca overcoat got out of the back seat, followed by two men who were clearly his subordinates. Tom thought that when he finally got around to writing his book on salutes, he should stick in a chapter about walking behind the boss. Tells you a lot.

The big man hit the porch talking. "Whoa, baby! You'd think anyplace this cold would at least have the decency to wrap some snow around itself." He quickly grasped Tom's outstretched hand. "Let's get inside, Lieutenant. If you catch cold out here because of me, NBC will have my ass in a wringer." A man clearly used to giving orders, he put his arm around Tom's shoulder and escorted him into his own office. "So you're Lieutenant Gregory, huh?"

"Yes sir. I don't believe I've had the pleasure."

The man leaned back just a bit, a smile of incredulity on his face. "Why, son, I'm Bob Hawk."

Tom paused just a second too long, but Jesse Hare jumped in to save him. "Bob Hawk? *The* Bob Hawk? 'You're a LEMAC now; you're a LEMAC now,'" he sang. Noting Tom's continued confusion, Hare leaned close to the other man. "LEMAC is just Camel backwards," he whispered.

Hawk said, "That's me, Sarge. Glad to know somebody around here listens to the radio. Let's have a seat over by the fireplace, okay? This is brass monkey weather, if you get my drift. Yessir, I'm Bob Hawk all right, so take your seat in the LEMAC box. I'm going to be the emcee for this year's *Camel Cigarettes Christmas Cavalcade of Stars*, and it's going to be a heck of a show—Nelson Eddy, Jimmy Wakely, Ella Mae Morse—we thought it would be cute her doing 'Cow-Cow Boogie' with real cowboys—and apparently the real stars of our show, your Italian singing prisoners." He took a leather notebook from one of his associates and flipped it open. "So the real question, at least to me, is not who am I, it's who are you, Lieutenant? General Sarnoff's illegitimate son? You must have some real grease at Rockefeller Center, my friend. The only reason we're at this Camp Goober—"

"Gruber," Tom corrected, "and they're not prisoners."

"—Camp Whatchamacallit is because the NBC brass wants to show how the Allies are getting stronger by getting the Italians on our side and

getting your men to actually join the Army. Don't get me wrong. I think it's a great idea myself. The Italian-American community will go nuts. That's why I wanted Perry Como instead of Nelson Eddy, but Chesterfield's got him locked up tighter than a drum. So we're going to make the show kind of Opera on the Prairie, and we got a dynamite surprise guest, believe me." Hawk looked back at his notebook. "You got a guy here named, um, Dee Amico?"

"D'Amico, sir, Vito D'Amico," Vito said, saluting unnecessarily.

"Do you speak English, son?"

"Some call it English; others say it's Flatbush, sir."

Hawk roared with laughter. "Ah, Brooklynese. I'm fluent in that language myself. Well, that's a pleasant surprise. You're going to have to tell me how a nice kid from Brooklyn winds up as a P.O.W. in Oklahoma. But another time. Look, we're going to be doing an abbreviated, and slightly easier version of my quiz show that night. Surprise, surprise, I'm going to pick you as a contestant. I'm not going to give you the answers; I'm not made that way and the audience can spot a phony a mile off. But this won't be Harvard. There's no way on earth I'm going to have you miss the first question and leave you and me looking stupid with five minutes of dead air on my hands. So just relax. I know you'll be fine, especially now that I know you come from the old neighborhood. They tell me you know all about opera. You ever hear of Risë Stevens?"

Because of the chancy weather and the fact that Camp Gruber was still mostly a tent city, the *Camel Cigarettes Christmas Cavalcade of Stars* was broadcast from the big rococo Ritz Theater in Muskogee, which was almost the site of Tom and Connie's first date. Only servicemen from Camp Gruber were admitted, and even though it entailed getting a twenty-four hour pass and wearing your best uniform, more than 2,000 soldiers showed up, filling the auditorium to overflowing. Loudspeakers were set up outside for the townspeople who lined both sides of the street. USO volunteers passed up and down the aisles giving away Cokes, candy bars and, of course, the ubiquitous packs of Camels to the soldiers.

Ironically, at least for Tom, last-minute orders all the way from Washington denied attendance by any Italian Service Unit member, except for the Chigger Lake Men's Chorus. Even they were hustled in

and out backstage in virtual secrecy. It was obvious that the Army was far more comfortable with the concept of the I.S.U. than its reality, at least at this early stage. Rob Luke and Corporal Victor Muñoz drew the short straws and stayed at camp to listen on the radio with the rest of the men. To blunt the Italians' disappointment, Pete Patterson brought them more pizza pies and special coffee, like he did on their first night of service.

Tom was complaining to Sergeant Jesse Hare. "It doesn't seem fair, Sergeant. Here our Italian boys were what got this thing kicked off in the first place, and now they can't even come?"

"For once I understand the brass's thinking completely," said Jesse, who had somehow managed to tuck a carton of Camels under each arm. "You told me that this is supposed to be a public relations program to introduce the American people to the new bright and shiny Italian Service Units. But a lot of regular soldiers are just back from Italy or maybe served in North Africa and the wounds may not have entirely healed. Some of our own fellows can be pretty hot-headed, too. If, God forbid, a fistfight were to break out in the theater, next week you'd be officer of the day for the Camp Gruber latrines and I would be a buck private, peeling potatoes for the next twenty years."

"Good point," Tom said and actually meant it.

Ten minutes before the seven p.m. broadcast that Sunday night, it seemed impossible that a show could be pulled out of the mare's nest on stage, with men wearing headsets moving microphones and music stands, band members warming up, people loudly reading scripts, and Emma Mae Morse mugging and signing autographs to the laughing delight of the soldiers sitting on the floor near the stage. But three minutes before air time, everything clicked into place like a finely-calibrated watch.

The band launched into the opening bars of the *Cavalcade* theme song, a hush fell over the audience, and a red light on stage lit up. The director pointed to Bob Hawk, who seemed even more self-assured than when Tom had met him a couple of weeks earlier, if that was possible.

The band swelled. "Ladies and gentlemen, direct from Camp Gruber, Oklahoma, Camel Cigarettes is proud to present our special *Christmas Cavalcade of Stars*. (applause) Tonight's host is the handsome singing star of *No, No, Nanette* and *Chocolate Soldiers*, Nelson Eddy. (louder applause) Mister Eddy's guests tonight include Oklahoma's own Jimmy Wakely singing his newest hits, that drop-dead singing beauty Emma Mae Morse, the Alvino Ray Orchestra, and yours

truly, Missus Hawk's little boy, Bob (band plays 'You're a LEMAC Now'). Plus some very special surprise guests. We'll be right back after these important words from our sponsor, Camel Cigarettes."

Nelson Eddy kicked off the show with a medley of Christmas songs, and then introduced Emma Mae Morse who sang her very popular "Shoo-Shoo Baby." Then she and Nelson Eddy sang a hilarious version of "Indian Love Call."

Jimmy Wakely sang "Too Late" and "There's a Star-Spangled Banner Waving Somewhere," which he dedicated to the troops, to predictably thunderous applause.

When they returned from another Camel cigarette commercial about how refreshing Camels were for your throat, Bob Hawk reintroduced Nelson Eddy.

"Thank you, Bob, and thank you, Jimmy Wakely, for that wonderful patriotic song. You know, there's a star-spangled banner waving from the rafters of Camp Gruber, thanks to you brave boys, and I'm happy to announce that you soldiers won't have to walk a mile for a Camel tonight. A carton of Camel Cigarettes is going out to all the service men and women of Camp Gruber with our very best holiday wishes. (wild applause) And Bob, I understand there is a brand new banner represented here tonight to add to the panoply of Allied flags."

"Right you are, Nelson. As you know, since the surrender of Italy to the Allied forces last month, more than forty thousand former Italian prisoners of war have stepped forward to pledge their loyalty and support to the United States, and to do their part in helping America bring Germany to its knees. So this month, the United States Army has formed the Italian Service Unit, where these loyal former prisoners can work stateside in hospitals, motor pools, construction and other important jobs, freeing more of our own fighting men to take America's call to freedom overseas and victory. One of these new Italian Service Units is located right here in Oklahoma, at the somewhat less-than-appealing-sounding Camp Chigger Lake. But what this camp may lack in rustic charms, it more than makes up for in industry. Camp Chigger Lake turns out more than ten thousand loaves of bread every day for our hungry troops. And when they're not making bread, at least some of them find time to make beautiful music. Ladies and gentlemen, the Italian Service Unit Camp Chigger Lake Men's Chorus." (polite applause)

Performing was old hat by this time to the twelve-man chorus, and they slipped easily into their holiday routine. They began with an Italian-language version of "Silent Night," then Angelo Festa sang a tender

“*Ave Maria*” with the chorus humming in the background and Murray Lipton playing the Bach counterpoint on the piano. Then, because the audience wasn’t sure you were supposed to clap after something like that, Aldo Pensotti immediately gave the downbeat for a rousing version of “Oklahoma.” Vito had a small solo on the lyrics, “We know we belong to the land; and the land we belong to is grand,” as the men behind him chanted “Okla-homa, Okla-homa.” When the men hit the final “Oklahoma, O.K.!” half the audience was singing along at the top of their lungs, with the other half clapping, stomping their feet and whistling.

“Wow,” Bob Hawk chortled loudly into his microphone, “I haven’t heard whistling like that since Betty Grable bent over to pick up her script on our Thanksgiving show. Chigger Lake Men’s Chorus, it’s clear that you’re okay, too. And just to say thanks, what do you say audience, should we put one of our new Italian soldiers in the LEMAC Box? (applause) How about that fellow that soloed in ‘Oklahoma’? At least we know he can sing in English. Come on down, Private Vito D’Amico.” (he pronounced it perfectly.) “Let’s play the LEMAC game.”

Vito D’Amico come out of the chorus and took his place behind a black metal music stand just a few feet away from Bob Hawk, who had some papers in his hand, which he seemed to ignore.

BOB HAWK: Actually, folks, I’ve got to admit that I did a little homework before the show. If your Italian is as rusty as mine, you’ll be glad to know that Private D’Amico speaks English, probably better than I do. You were raised in Brooklyn, weren’t you?

D’AMICO: Yes sir, Mister Hawk. Excuse me, I’m a little nervous. I went to grade school and high school in the shadow of Ebbets Field, and I studied music at the Brooklyn Academy of Music.

BOB HAWK: Just take it easy, son. I won’t bite, and neither will that microphone. So if you don’t mind me asking, how did you wind up in the Italian Army?

D’AMICO: I went back to run the opera house in Verona, and much to my surprise, I got drafted, probably like almost every GI in this theater. (laughter)

BOB HAWK: Well, your background in music is going to help you tonight, because music is the category we’ve chosen for you. Now you know how our game works—I ask you five questions. Each right answer is worth ten dollars. If you answer all five correctly, you and your fellow chorus members will share one hundred silver dollars. So let’s get started. And to give you a little help out of the gate, I’ll give you an L if you just answer me this: what the heck is a chigger?

D’AMICO: (laughs) My buddies in Flatbush would call him a flea with a switchblade. What he lacks in size, he makes up in mean. He never met an ankle he didn’t want to bite.

BOB HAWK: Whoa, you won’t catch me down by your lake. Okay, let’s get going, and I gotta warn you, each question gets a little harder. The Toreador Song is one of the most famous in opera history. What is the name of the opera, who wrote it, and what language is it written in? (audience groans)

D’AMICO: That would be *Carmen*, Mister Hawk. It was written by Bizet, and even though it takes place in Spain, it is written in French.

BOB HAWK: That’s absolutely right! You’re doing just fine. But you know, Private D’Amico, because the questions get harder each time, we occasionally allow our contestants to bring in an expert to help them out. Just wondering, if you could have someone to help you, who would it be?

D’AMICO: That’s easy, Mister Hawk. It would be the greatest contralto of our time, Risë Stevens.

RISË STEVENS: Did somebody call me? (wild applause)

BOB HAWK: Hey, everybody, it’s the beautiful and talented Risë Stevens! Hi, Miss Stevens. What in the world are you doing in Oklahoma?

RISË STEVENS: I’m actually on my way back from Hollywood, Bob. We just finished shooting the new Paramount Pictures release *Going My Way*, which should be in theaters next month. Bing Crosby plays Father Terry O’Malley, who comes to help out a poor parish. I play

Bing's old friend, an opera singer named Risë Stevens. Can you imagine? Quite a stretch for an actor. How do you do, Private D'Amico. If I can be of help, just whistle. (whistles from audience)

D'AMICO: Thank you Miss Stevens. You probably don't remember, but we've actually met before. You sang Octavian in *Der Rosenkavalier* at the Verona Opera the last year I was there.

RISË STEVENS: (gasps) Oh my goodness, that's right. I was there. It was one of my first big roles. I was scared stiff. That was you? Well, hello.

BOB HAWK: Okay, you two. We can play old home week backstage. Right now, let's make some money. Private, I'm going to give you an M just because you are lucky enough to get Miss Stevens on your side. But here comes a toughie: "Musetta's Waltz" is Puccini's most famous aria. Who is Musetta and what is the name of the opera?

RISË STEVENS: Private D'Amico, may I? I sang the role of Musetta when I was still a teenager. She's Mimi's best friend, Bob, and the opera is *La Boheme*.

BOB HAWK: Absolutely correct. So now for one hundred silver dollars and your chance to take your seat in the LEMAC box, listen up. In Verdi's opera *Nabucco*, the "Prisoners' Song" is also known by another name. For one hundred silver dollars, can you give me the other name?

D'AMICO: I can do better than that, Bob. *Maestro Pensotti*? (chorus comes back on stage singing) "*Va, pensiero, sull' ali dorate....*"

Nelson Eddy, Risë Stevens and the Men's Chorus wrapped up the show with "*Adeste Fideles*" and "America the Beautiful." The minute the show was over, the NBC switchboards in New York were lit up for hours. America, it seemed, had fallen in love with the new Italian Service Units.

Nobody, especially not Tom Gregory or Vito D'Amico, could have foreseen how short-lived that love affair was destined to be.



Tom and Connie had planned to take their furloughs together and spend the holidays with his family in Greenville and Cleveland, but the Army had other ideas. Both Lieutenants had received orders changing their assignments, and for Connie at least, her base of operations. In a gesture worthy of O. Henry, each decided to delay telling the other until after Christmas and New Year's.

They spent Christmas week with Connie's father in Oklahoma City. As predictably as swallows returning to Capistrano, the annual pre-New Year's Oklahoma Ice Storm came cracking its way through town, coating trees and houses with a sheath of hoar that seemed willing to stay until April.

The icy streets also brought on the risky and highly improvisational amateur Oklahoma Winter Olympics. This annual danger-fest was hard to accomplish in a region with no mountains and where ice on the ponds was too thin and spotty to sustain a man, but the young foolhardy gallants found a way. One of the most popular, and by far the most dangerous events was the Okie Sleigh Ride. The teenagers would put on their cowboy boots, run into the road, grab the back bumper of a slow-moving and unsuspecting auto, and—holding on for dear life—go flying down the frozen streets. Every year, one or more of the boys would hit a dry manhole cover at fifteen miles an hour and go wind-milling into a tree or bus bench, breaking an arm or leg. This only made Okie sleigh riding more appealing to the young adventurers, of course, and if the police chief would issue a proclamation cracking down on this unofficial winter sport, so much the better.

Watching the boys sliding down the Harvey Parkway, Tom stood transfixed at Bill Ballard's bay front window. He couldn't take his eyes

off the crouching, laughing swashbucklers. “That’s got to be the most dangerous thing I’ve ever seen. And to show you how depraved I am, I can’t stop watching. What do they do in the summertime? Hitch rides on low-flying airplanes?”

“Just another example of the automobile replacing the horse, I guess,” Connie’s father said in a gravelly baritone that matched his thick-as-a-brick oil field physique. “I did it when I was their age, behind Model T’s. It’s just part of growing up.”

Connie came skipping up beside them, wearing an apron and energetically whipping a bowl of something white and frothy. “It’s also a good way to thin out the herd, isn’t it, Daddy? The smart ones do it once or twice; the dumb ones keep doing it ‘til they wrap themselves around a stop sign.” She turned to Tom. “And you want to know dangerous? Wait’ll you get to the New Year’s Eve party. I’ve already told everybody that we are getting married. All my girlfriends are going to be lying in the weeds, ready to pounce.”

“You all going over to the Barclays’ tomorrow night?” Bill Ballard asked.

Susan Barclay had been Connie’s best friend in high school and roomed with her their first year of nursing school. But then she met the older and oil-rich Clayton “Clay” Barclay, and there was no second year of nursing school for Susan. The Barclay mansion near the country club had become the lodge pole for the Oklahoma City social scene, where the only things “dry” in that part of the state were the martinis.

“Yes, Daddy. I wanted to show Tom how the other half lives. Won’t you change your mind and come with us?”

“That wouldn’t be New Year’s heavenly hash you’re whipping up, would it? No, babe, you guys go ahead. I’ll celebrate New Year’s the way I always do, with a good cigar, a couple of bottles of Progress and my old buddy Guy Lombardo on the radio. Have I ever told you how grateful I am that Lombardo broadcasts out of New York City? Means I can get to bed at eleven. You might want to turn in early yourself, Tom. An evening at the Barclays’ can be a mite long. Now don’t go flashing those eyes at me, Connie. I’m only doing what any good prospective father-in-law should do, warn Tom about the Clayton Curse.”

“Daddy, you’re so mean,” Connie laughed. “Susan is such a dear, Tom. But it’s true that Clay can get a little boring at times.”

“At times,” Bill hooted. “Only on days ending in Y. You watch, Tom. He hasn’t spent a minute in the military, but he’ll take one look at your uniform and tell you everything you need to know about being an Army officer, why the idiots in Washington are wasting our tax dollar, why Roosevelt—and he’ll pronounce it wrong—is just using the war so he can nationalize the oil fields and then, without missing a beat, he’ll tell you the fastest way to make captain. If I were you, I wouldn’t mention anything about the prisoners of war or the Italian Service Unit.”

“Oops,” said Connie, stirring furiously.

The Barclay mansion was a yellow brick and glass tri-level on the aptly-named Grand Avenue, built in the style some critics had dubbed Cherokee Modern. It looked more like a fancy doctor’s office than a house, Tom thought, and the size of the front yard boggled him.

“They must mow this baby with an International Harvester,” Tom said. “I’m going to propose we play next year’s Army-Navy game right here.”

“I’m sure Clay would be agreeable if they let him play quarterback for both teams,” Connie said. “Speaking of Army, you look mighty handsome in your dress uniform, my dashing young Lieutenant.”

Tom pulled his little coupe (that seemed to be shrinking by the minute) down the long semi-circular driveway. It was snowing gently and the twinkling lights in the trees around the house added a fairyland dimension to the estate. “And you are my beautiful princess, Connie. That dress is a stunner. I really don’t care how the evening turns out, as long as I can steal glances of you from time to time.”

“Thank you, sweetie. It is fun to dress up, isn’t it? Let’s dress up every New Year after we’re married, even if it’s just the two of us, okay? I don’t want you to slip into the cigars, beer and Guy Lombardo routine like Daddy for as long as I can help it.” Tom helped her out of the car. “This should be a lot of fun. Susan and her girlfriends are going to be all over you like bobby-soxers on a bandstand. And Clay’s bark is worse than his bite.” She shook her head as they walked to the front door and whispered, “Of course, that doesn’t mean he won’t bite, especially after his third whiskey.”

Susan was gorgeous, and as bubbly and funny as Tom suspected Connie’s best friend would have to be. She answered the enormous door

in a slinky gown that was either satin or spray paint. “Myrna Loy,” Tom mumbled appreciatively to himself, making his usual movie comparison. He reddened under Susan’s smiling, penetrating gaze.

“I heard that, Lieutenant. I’m flattered. Come on in.” She gestured to the large room filled with maybe a dozen men and women standing around a marble fireplace and grand piano. “I guess this does look a little like a leftover set from some old Nick and Nora movie, doesn’t it? Wait until you meet my husband Clay. He actually insisted on wearing a tuxedo tonight. He’s still upstairs, figuring out the bow tie. Don’t look for Asta, though. We had to put her in the paté. Ran completely out of meat ration stamps. Oh, Connie, I’m so happy for you. He does blush up a storm, just as advertised. C’mon. I want you to meet everybody.”

Again Tom was surprised and delighted by the Oklahoman egopuncturing sense of humor. Susan had a nickname, usually wicked, for everybody Tom met which she would whisper to him as they moved to the next person. He met sultry Round Heels Rountree, standing next to a sallow-skinned and large-jawed girl Susan called the Green Lantern. There was a florid-faced man about Tom’s age dubbed Apple Andy. Tom’s personal favorite was a beefy man with just the trace of an old acne problem and a pronounced five o’clock shadow, known as Penitentiary Face Calhoun. Of course, this game made it virtually impossible for Tom to remember anybody’s real name later in the evening.

They had just reached the foot of the landing when Clay Barclay came bumping loudly down the stairs.

“Boots and bow tie, cowboy formal,” he announced. “Happy New Year everybody, and welcome to the Barclay bunkhouse. The old Clay Bar Clay Ranch. Only one request—don’t shoot the piano player.” He roared at his own obviously-practiced bon mot. “Well, howdy, Lieutenant. Glad to see I’m not the only one in formal dress. Those are your dress pinks, right? Mighty splendid. Although for the life of me I don’t see the pink. When they name me Secretary of the Army, I’m going to rename them dress drab, no offense.”

“None taken,” Tom said, extending his hand. “Beats me, too. Maybe General Pershing was color blind. Thanks for inviting us. Susan was just taking me around to meet everybody.”

“I was telling Tom everyone’s hidden nickname.” Susan turned to Tom. “Clay doesn’t have one, of course. I’ve thrown a couple at him, but they won’t stick.”

Barclay drained the drink he had come down the stairs with, and deftly placed it on the maid’s tray as she moved through the room. “Thank you, darling. Could you wrangle me up a Wellers and water next chance you get? Looks like Andy is about ready, too. Clay *is* my nickname, Susan, hon. Remember?”

“It doesn’t count if your mother gave it to you before you were born, Clayton. It’s got to be one we give you, and it should sting just a little.” Susan started to laugh, saw the look in Clay’s eyes, then set her jaw and returned his gaze, glint for glint.

Connie, who like the rest of the guests could see the antlers locking, tried to lighten the moment. “Did you know that Indian men are all given a new name, their warrior name, when they become a brave? Some of their names can be just as rough as Susan’s—Rain in the Face had small pox, Echo Harjo stuttered, Bowlegs kind of speaks for itself, I guess.”

The storm clouds parted and the entire room exhaled in relieved unison. Clay retrieved his new drink and sat on the arm of a sofa. “I forgot Susan telling me you were Indian, Connie. And now here you are, an Indian W.A.C. in Indian Territory. Nice uniform you’re wearing, too, I might add. When I’m Secretary of the Army, you get to keep that one. So, Tom, I understand that the two of you met in an Army prison?”

“Chain gang, actually,” said Connie. “It was love among the leg irons.”

Tom chuckled and took the opportunity to grasp Connie’s hand, which was moist with anger. “As I remember it, we met on the bus to Camp Gruber. I stumbled all over myself as usual. But if you’re asking if the Army has assigned Connie and me to the prisoner of war sector, the answer is yes. And it’s an amazing experience. Did you know this is the first time since the Civil War that enemy prisoners have been housed here in the States? And the first time ever with foreign prisoners? For some reason, I guess because there’s lots of federal land out here, most of the prison camps are located in Kansas, Oklahoma and Texas.”

Penitentiary Face Calhoun, who as it turned out was married to one of the most beautiful women Tom had ever seen, joined in the conversation. “I guess they also put them here figuring it’d be a long walk home if they ever escaped. I’m really interested in this. We heard this guy at Lion’s Club a couple of weeks ago, Colonel Appleman or Appleton, I think, saying there were close to a quarter of a million German and Italian prisoners of war, and not one has escaped. Is that true?”

“That’s Major Frank Appleton; he’s my boss at Camp Gruber. And yes, by and large, they are model prisoners. There’s a Nazi S.S. prison camp in Alva where they killed a man a couple of months ago, but it was one of their own, apparently some grudge they brought over with them from Germany. I run an Italian camp, what we now call an Italian Service Unit, and I can tell you not only do they not want to escape, most of them don’t want to leave, period. They want to stay here, eat three square meals a day—thanks to Connie—sleep in a real bed and wear shoes. They hate the Germans as much as we do, by the way, and they’re going to help us win this war.”

“Connie said that all the Italians in her bakery signed an oath of allegiance to the United States and they work like crazy. Some of them are cute, too,” Susan added.

“If I was going to be a spy or saboteur, I’d be the first one in line to sign that oath,” Clay grumbled. “So you’re the Italian warden?”

“Clay, would you please lighten up, for goodness sakes?” Penitentiary Face demanded. “Is it your New Year’s resolution to piss everybody off? Lieutenant, we are so grateful to you and Connie for serving our country. So the Italian prisoners of war are working for the Army now?”

“They’re not just working for the Army, Mister Calhoun. In a manner of speaking, they’re in the Army. It’s a funny thing, and again it’s the first time in American history that anything like this has ever happened. There are no more Italian prisoners of war, because we are no longer at war with Italy. The government of Italy is now our ally, joining us in our fight against Hitler. In every other war in American history, from the Revolutionary War right on through World War One, the first thing that happens when the war is over is an exchange of prisoners. Only we can’t do that this time. Hitler still occupies most of Italy, and the war is still raging there, as you know. We couldn’t send them back if we wanted to, which of course we do. So here the Italians sit, no longer prisoners, but unable to go home. The fastest way they can return to their friends and family is to join hands with us. And they are.”

There was a new drink in Clay’s hand, which he was using as a pointer. “You can’t tell me. I see those newsreels of Mussolini and his brown shirt boys all the time. They look mighty Italian to me.”

“That’s right, Clay,” Tom said gently. “There were some Mussolini loyalists who refused to sign the oath of allegiance. Nobody forced them

to sign it, or even asked them, for that matter. It was strictly voluntary. The hardcore fascists were all sent to prisoner of war camps in Hereford, Texas, and Mesa, Arizona.”

“Brr,” Calhoun laughed, shaking his head. “I’ve never been to Arizona, but I’ve been to Hereford lots of times. That’s the jumping off place, for sure.”

Clay had sunk deep into the couch, using one of the pillows as a shield. “That still doesn’t mean there aren’t saboteurs. And now they’ll be walking the streets of America, wearing Army uniforms, free as the breeze. What in the hell are they going to be doing, anyway? Packing parachutes?”

“They’ll be freeing up American soldiers in stateside non-combat duties, like hospital orderlies, hammering nails, painting signs, digging latrines and ditches, stuff you and I wouldn’t want to do. Pretty hard to sabotage a latrine, don’t you think?”

“It is, at that,” Calhoun said, “and if you could have messed up a ditch, I probably would have tried it in the last war, out of sheer boredom. I spent my entire enlistment digging the equivalent of three Panama Canals at Fort Leonard Wood. So in a way, I know what you’re going through, Lieutenant. They also serve, and all that. Thank you.”

Tom shook the man’s hand. “And thank you. I’m sorry. Please forgive me. I can’t remember your first name.”

“It’s Paul. But everybody calls me P.F.—that stands for Penitentiary Face. It’s a nickname my mother gave me before I was born.” The man roared in laughter.

Just before midnight, Tom and Connie found a quiet corner for a glass of champagne and some soul-gazing. They had come to the place in their relationship where they could say more with their eyes than most folks with a pad of paper and a lectern. More importantly, perhaps, they were unaware of the silence.

Finally, Tom looked down into the champagne flute he was holding in both hands. “I guess it was good Clay goaded me into talking about the Italian Service Units, because it gives me the excuse to tell you something I’ve been holding back until the right moment. I got orders just before we got our Christmas furlough. Looks like Camp Chigger Lake as we know it is about to change, Connie. The Army is going to

convert it into the I.S.U. motor pool training center. A couple of hundred men will be cycling through every four weeks, learning simple repairs and English nomenclature for everything under a hood, then they'll go off in units of forty or fifty to military bases all over the country. The first group coming in February is headed up to the Twenty-Eighth I.S.U. in Seattle. I'll still be the commander and keep my core staff, and of course Ennio and his bakers will still be there, but this is going to be Sergeant Hare and Corporal Muñoz's show; they're the motor pool experts. They will both probably get another stripe out of this. At least, I've put them in for promotion. I'll mostly be standing on the sidelines, which I seem to be getting better and better at as the war progresses."

Connie put her hand gently on his arm. "You'll be fine, honey. You are the brains behind all this, and I've never heard anyone better able to explain and defend the units." She patted his hand and leaned back a little, which was a signal for Tom to pay sharp attention. "I've gotten a new assignment, too. I'll still be nominally in charge of the commissary and bakery, but they run themselves, really, and even the Army seems to know it. I've been re-assigned to head up the hospital orderly program at Glennan Hospital in Okmulgee. I need to take about a hundred men from Chigger Lake and break them up into round-the-clock orderly groups, with a couple of W.A.C. nurses for each shift. We don't need them to speak much English. I'll work with you and Rob to pick some of your slower learners, so it shouldn't be too disruptive. But hon, it means I'm going to have to move to Okmulgee for a few months, maybe longer. It's not like I'm moving to Mars, and I'll still keep some things at Oklahoma's house, but babe, I hope that little Ford of yours learns how to travel north, because I'm going to be pretty much stuck there for a while."

"I understand," Tom said, looking into his half-empty glass. "When do you have to leave?"

"That's the bad news. I've got to report January sixth. But the good news is Sergeant Hare and Corporal Muñoz aren't the only ones getting a promotion. I get my silver bar, honey—first lieutenant."

Tom didn't look up. "Me, too, for what it's worth. Happy New Year, Connie."



Tom dropped Connie off at Glennan Hospital, then drove the longest and loneliest thirty-five miles in creation from Okmulgee to Chigger Lake. In the next few months he would learn every curve, pothole and fence post on that highway, but today the distance seemed interminable, more existential than geographic. Tom felt a bit ashamed that on that day, at least, his desire to see the war end was patently selfish, deeply emotional and lacking in lofty principles. He wanted the war over, not to save lives or preserve the American way of life, but so he could marry Connie. Maybe it's the same thing, he rationalized, but down deep he knew he'd readily accept the Desert Island way of life if it meant Connie was by his side. He was Joe Louis haymaker in love.

When he crossed the Big River wooden bridge and turned up Lake Weleetka Road, he was met by huge stacks of corrugated tin, I-beams, concrete and sheetrock. Floyd Breedlove waved from atop a back hoe. Tom also recognized Private Lipton, with his ever-present clipboard, and dozens of the Italian soldiers clearing, leveling and laying pipe for a structure that would eventually be as big as an airplane hangar.

Tom got out of the car to be met by the grinning and familiar face of one of the workers. "Hiya, Coach," the young man yelled, and saluted.

"Well, hello, Big Boy," Tom said. "I haven't seen you in ages. You don't look any worse for wear. How's your daddy? What are you doing out here? And what's with the salute? You can answer those in any order you choose."

"Daddy's fine. He says hidey. Guess what? I joined the Army. Well, sort of. I signed all the papers, but the recruiter in Wetumka told me to come on back here 'til I finish school and turn eighteen. I report to Fort Sill in June."

Floyd walked up, wiping his hands on the shop rag that lived in his back pocket. "Welcome back, Lieutenant. I see you met my newest employee. Big Boy here is a great worker. Lucky, too. When I was eighteen, I was a grizzled veteran, heading back home from the Great War with a chunk out of my noggin. Grab a shovel, will you, Big Boy? You can scrape as I dig."

"Yes sir, Mister Breedlove. Uh, Coach? Now that I'm sort of in the Army, I don't know if I'm supposed to call you Coach, or Lieutenant, or what."

"Better move on up to Lieutenant, then, I guess. Come June, you'll be yessiring and nosiring everybody anyway and saluting everything that moves, including jeeps, so you may as well get started. Besides, I'm pretty sure my coaching days are behind me." He smiled. "It's good to see you, Big Boy."

"Yes sir," the hulking teenager laughed and saluted, then ran off to stand at attention beside the back hoe, his shovel at right-shoulder arms.

Tom turned to his friend. "Well, Floyd, this is sure a beehive of activity. What are you building, Penn Central?"

"It's amazing, isn't it? Murray and Sergeant Hare are working like the dickens to get ready for your first wave of students in three weeks; got two work crews working seven days a week. That Murray—what a guy. If I had half his brains, I'd be twice as smart. He and Muñoz and that professor are finishing up a book in English and Italian naming every single part of every vehicle the Army uses, from the deuce-and-a-half to a pull trailer. The book shows how to change spark plugs, rotate tires, grease and lube jeeps, everything. It's called *Shop Talk* and Miss Garland and I are going to print it at the newspaper. And you know what else? Murray asked me to teach him to speak Creek in his spare time. So I've been taking him out in the woods every now and then—it's too cold to fish—teaching him his numbers and the names of animals and such. You got to be careful you don't teach him nothing wrong, 'cause he'll hear you say it, then he'll repeat it two or three times, and he's got it locked in. No wonder he can learn all those songs on the piano."

"You're awfully proud of him, aren't you Floyd? Well, I'm mighty proud of all of you. This motor pool school is going to be a very big deal and help the war effort a lot. I'm honored to be a part of it." Tom turned and walked slowly back to his car, lost in thought. He was beginning to understand how a general might feel now and then—essential, but not always important.



In less than ten days, the structure was completed. It resembled a small blacktop parking lot with the north one-third walled and covered in corrugated tin. Warming sheds stood at each corner and space heaters at each work station kept the protected area warm enough to work without gloves.

While the motor pool building was being constructed, four of the barracks were converted to classrooms, where Oklahoma Garland and her book brigade ladies had been hired to teach English. The Army didn't have any English/Italian textbooks geared for Italians learning English; it had simply never occurred to anyone. Major Appleton suggested to Oklahoma that she obtain textbooks from the Foreign Service School, but when she got them and read phrases like "Would you care for a game of tennis, Mrs. Ambassador" and "Can you direct me to the American Embassy?", she junked the books and, with the help of Vito, wrote her own. In less than two months, the two books she wrote, *A Day in the Army* and *A Day in America*, had been accepted by the other Italian Service Unit training centers in Georgia, Missouri and Tennessee, and were being printed by the thousands. Along with *Shop Talk*, the Weleetka *American* quickly found itself the largest printer of Italian Service Unit manuals in the country.

A week before the first classes arrived, Rob Luke, Victor Muñoz and almost a hundred Italian soldiers, riding two in a cab, came rumbling into Weleetka in an armada of Army vehicles never seen in that tiny town before or since. The lumbering vehicles were required to go no faster than twenty miles an hour and hug the side of the road so civilian traffic could pass. It didn't take long for word of the convoy to get out as the trucks passed slowly by the farmhouses on the edge of town. Weleetka youngsters tore over to the Henryetta side of town and watched the military parade; then hopped on their bikes, cut across town and watched the parade again as it crept down the Weleetka curve, crossed the Big River bridge, and headed for the camp.

By the time the fifty or so trucks, jeeps and caissons passed through town, the young people were joined by what seemed like half the residents. Lining Main Street, which was also the highway at that point, they laughed, pointed and talked like they were watching the circus pulling into town. And they weren't disappointed. Every imaginable army vehicle, filled with grinning and waving I.S.U. soldiers, drove

slowly by: two-and-a-half and one-and-a-quarter ton trucks, three-quarter ton Dodge Power Wagons, four-by-fours and other light trucks of every variety, panel trucks, an ambulance, an old command car, and of course every quarter-ton jeep imaginable. Somewhat to the disappointment of the young boys, all the armament, machine guns and such had been removed at Camp Gruber. But it was as close as any of these youngsters would come to this war, at least.

Tom, Sergeant Hare and Private Lipton formed a reception line at the camp's entrance. Private Lipton checked each vehicle off the inventory list as it passed.

"They look kind of beat up when they get this close, don't they?" Tom observed.

Sergeant Hare cocked an eyebrow and took the cigarette out of his mouth. "You didn't really expect them to send us new ones, did you? I imagine by the time all is said and done, we'll just about have repaired these old boys to death. Don't forget, we're only going to have a month with each group. Just about the time they get the hang of it, we'll ship 'em out." He sighed. "Those poor trucks. This is going to be the motor pool equivalent of barber college, I'm afraid. We'll get the job done, but you wouldn't want to send a picture of the results home to mamma. Don't worry, Lieutenant, I won't let anybody touch your Ford but Victor and me. Took me way too much time to scrounge it in the first place."

The first two hundred Italian soldiers trucked into Camp Chigger Lake were a far remove from the sorry, bedraggled lot that had stepped off the prison trains almost a year earlier. The armed M.P.s were gone, replaced on each truck by a couple of standard-issue G.I.s. But it was the men themselves—well-fed, well-clothed and as boisterous as any bunch of young soldiers off on an adventure—who reminded Tom of just how far the Italian prisoners had come.

They also came with something new: their own set of officers. The Italian officers who had once been separated from the enlisted men into their own camps were now reunited, one officer to each fifty-man unit. And the reunion did not always go smoothly.

As the third truck pulled up to the parade ground, one of the off-loading soldiers stumbled and dropped his duffle in the dirt. As he bent to retrieve the bag, his garrison cap flew off, and he went chasing after

it like a farmer after a chicken. The soldiers around him laughed loudly, then immediately fell silent. The pack of men parted as another man strode to within inches of the unfortunate soldier, and barked something that Tom, who was standing off to the side with Vito D'Amico, couldn't make out. Then the barking soldier slapped the stumbler in the face, hard.

"Did you see that?" Tom asked Vito.

"Yes, sir. That's clearly one of the officers. I didn't catch everything, but it sounded like he said that the soldier had humiliated him by acting like a peasant. I know the slap looks bad, *Tenente*, but it is not unheard of in the Italian army."

"Those officers are in the American Army now, Vito, and that will never by-God happen again or that officer will be back in a P.O.W. camp so fast his feet won't touch the ground. I'm going to remain standing right here. Please go over there and tell that man to report to the Camp *Comandante* immediately. Point back to me so he will know you speak with authority. Do you think you can round up the other three officers, too?"

"No problem. They'll stick out like a sore thumb."

"Get their names to me—write them down—and then please give them my compliments and say I wish them to come to my office on the double. If you meet even the slightest resistance, tell them that I am authorized to send them back to Camp Gruber this very day for re-assignment. And then go ask Private Pipp to bring a bottle of that good red wine that Pete left here, five glasses, and plenty of cheese and bread. I'm going to try the honey before the vinegar."

When Tom arrived at the administration building, the offending officer was already seated stiffly at the conference table in the corner of the room nearest Tom's office. Tom studiously ignored the soldier and walked to the desk of a very curious Sergeant Hare, where he picked up and began studying a pile of papers.

"Good afternoon, Lieutenant," Hare said. "Mind letting me in on what's going on? This arrogant bastard comes stomping in here, gives me one of those heel-clicking, palms-out Italian salutes, says something I don't understand about *Comandante* and *presentari*, gives me another salute, then goes statue on me. I tell him to go sit over there, which he does, and starts staring daggers at me. If looks could kill, I'd be dead and a half by now."

“He’s one of the four Italian officers assigned to the new trainees. Thirty seconds after he arrived here, he slapped another soldier. In a couple of minutes, Vito is going to show up with the other three officers. Have them all sit at the table, then ask Vito to bring the names of the officers to me. Then I’m going to have what my mother used to call a ‘Come to Jesus’ talk with these fellows.”

Vito arrived with the three breathless and confused officers, and handed Tom a sheet of paper.

“Ask them to have a seat,” Tom said, busily reading and committing Vito’s information to memory.

He let them wait for a few minutes, then when he figured they were so nervous they were about to faint, he completely reversed course and, his long legs eating up the distance between them, came beaming like Christmas morning to the conference table. The four men jumped to attention and saluted.

Tom briefly returned their salute, but kept walking toward them, smiling broadly. He turned to Vito and spoke in his now almost-perfect Italian. “Thank you, Private D’Amico. That will be all.” He held out his hand to the first officer, continuing to speak in Italian. “Welcome, welcome, gentlemen. You would be Captain Monzo, correct? Major Siciliano? My pleasure. Captain Girardi? Captain Peroni. It is my pleasure to welcome you to the Fifth Italian Service Unit Training Center in Weleetka, Oklahoma.”

Each man, most particularly Captain Girardi (who had slapped the soldier), may have harbored fears or resentments about this meeting, but none had expected the collegial bilingual officer shaking their hands. They remained standing, furtively exchanging glances, unsure of what to do next.

“Please sit down, gentlemen. Feel free to smoke if you have cigarettes.” Just then Wally Pipp walked in carrying a tray of wine and cheese. Tom switched to English, but spoke slowly and distinctly so the officers might understand. “Ah, afternoon refreshments. Thank you, Private Pipp. And Sergeant Hare, are there cigarettes, please?”

Jesse Hare, his eyebrows virtually ascending into his hairline, silently reached into the bottom drawer of his desk and retrieved two packs of the unending and slightly over the hill supply of Lucky Strike Greens. He placed them, along with a box of matches and an ash tray, in the center of the table.

“*Comandante*,” Hare muttered, and returned to his desk.

Tom laughed, and again began speaking in Italian. “Now you gentlemen must think that everybody here speaks Italian. Well, we are trying. What is the saying? ‘When you are in Rome, do as the Romans?’ We have the same saying in English. But many people forget the other half of that saying, don’t they? ‘If you are elsewhere, live as they do there.’ Gentlemen, you are elsewhere, and we need to discuss some very serious issues. As a fellow officer, I understand the difficulty of maintaining discipline among the soldiers. You may have had different ways when you were in the Italian army. But you are no longer in the Italian army. You are in the American Army. And you will now act precisely according to the rules and regulations of the United States Army. Captain Girardi, if an American officer slapped an enlisted man as you just did, do you know what would happen? He would be immediately (Tom searched for the word and wasn’t sure he got it) decommissioned and maybe sent to prison.”

Captain Girardi leaned back in his chair, frowned and looked to his fellow officers for support. Finding absolutely none, he fumbled for a pack of cigarettes, glad to have something to do with his hands. “I did not know. I, I am sorry.”

“Please help yourself to the wine, gentlemen. They make it right here in Oklahoma, can you imagine? Well, of course you can’t know everything, that’s why we are having this meeting. But here is the rule: while you are a member of the Italian Service Unit, you may not slap, strike or in any way touch an enlisted man. You also may not demand a soldier do any personal work for you—no cleaning boots, no ironing, no washing, absolutely nothing. You will obey these rules. They are easy rules to obey. If you break them, you will be stripped of your privilege to be in the Service Unit and you will be sent to the prisoner of war camp at Hereford, Texas. Let me tell you a little bit about Hereford, Texas. You were all in the prison camp in Missouri last summer, correct? Picking peaches? There is not a peach in this world strong enough to grow in Hereford, Texas. And there is no money to be earned picking tarantulas and scorpions, Hereford’s only crops.”

Tom picked up his small fruit glass half-filled with wine. “But I know you will make yourself and the American Army proud. And every Friday afternoon, we will meet here over bread, wine and cheese and discuss the plans for the coming week.” He stood and raised his glass.

“Welcome to the training center, gentlemen. I look forward to working with you.”

The men stood in unison and raised their glasses. “*Saluti*,” they shouted. In heavily-accented English, Captain Girardi yelled, “God bless the United States of America!”

Could be I’m not as useless as I thought, Tom mused, and drained his glass.



Eastern Oklahoma breathed a sigh of relief in the spring of 1944 after a decade of too little rain and then way too much. Spring was early and mild, and even the tornadoes stayed away for once.

It was without doubt the best time of Tom’s life. He and Connie were deeply in love, and like lovers everywhere, they tended to think that everybody else was in love, too. And as far as Oklahoma Garland and Vito D’Amico were concerned, they were spot on.

They worked out a routine where Tom would drive to Okmulgee to pick up Connie after work on Thursdays. On Fridays Connie would spend the day at the V.F.W. hall with Ennio, his bakers and the dozen or so Weleetka women cooking, canning and packing food. Connie had to constantly revise the weekly menus to accommodate the enormous influx of German prisoners of war (who loved their pumpernickel and cabbage soup, but didn’t have much use for Pete’s garlic—or Connie’s okra, for that matter).

At the end of work on Fridays the four lovers, usually accompanied by Pete and Floyd, would have the weekly dinner special at Mrs. Clark’s, then walk the three blocks to the movie theater, where they’d be joined by Mary Beth Devine the minute she closed the box office. Although the Italian soldiers were supposed to be accompanied by a G.I. when they went to town, many of the original Chigger Lakers, who now numbered less than two hundred, honored this with a wink and a nod from Sergeant Hare. Antonio (Tough Tony) Aranetto and Mary Cox were part of the Friday Night Royal Regulars, as were Sergio Barbieri and Moro Morino. Aldo Pensotti claimed to be above such things, but when Rob Luke showed the camp *One Hundred Men* and a Girl with Deanna Durbin in October, *Il Maestro* fell in love. When *Can’t Help*

Singing hit Weleetka in March, Pensotti sat through both shows all four nights, even if it meant walking the two miles back to camp alone. “Ah, for Deanna Durbin, I walk to camp on my knees, like Lourdes. Maybe prayers will be answered, you think?”

Even though *Il Maestro*’s dreams of Deanna Durbin remained unanswered, he, Murray Lipton, Sergio Barbieri and the other Chigger Lake music instructors were delighted to see that they had primed dreams for some Weleetka high school students. The Oklahoma All State music competitions were held at Oklahoma City University in late March that year, with soloists, instrumental ensembles of every size and combination, dance bands, and full marching bands competing for trophies and ribbons. Weleetka hadn’t sent anybody to state, as it was called, for as long as anyone could remember. But in 1944, they were “by God loaded for bear,” as Ed Carter said over and over to anyone who’d listen.

Tom had actually gotten his hand slapped earlier for using an Army truck to transport the football team, but he said he’d find a way to get the instruments to Oklahoma City if the kids could find rides with friends or family. Connie’s dad and his friends from church offered to put the youngsters up for the one night sleepover, the first night away from Weleetka for most of the excited students.

Murray Lipton went with the group as accompanist for the soloists, and Aldo Pensotti, in his freshly-starched I.S.U. dress shirt and tie, conducted the full band and glee club. Oklahoma Garland went along as chaperone and Boswell, promising Ed Carter that—win, lose or draw—she was going to print a special All State edition of the *American*.

And what a special edition it was. “WELEETKA TAKES STATE!” screamed the headline across the top of page one in 72-point type, a type size usually reserved for dead presidents and toppled governments. There was a two-column photo above the fold of Calvin Wickers, his tenor saxophone around his neck, holding a state fair-sized ribbon with a beaming Ed Carter beside him hoisting a trophy. The cutline read, “Four-year scholarship and membership in O.U.’s Pride of Oklahoma Marching Band Await Winning Weleetkan.”

Further down the page was another picture of the Lighthorsemen, a stiff Sergio Barbieri at one end, and an equally-stiff Ed Carter at the other. The Lighthorsemen won best dance band hands down. This was something of a surprise as they upset the Durant High School Teen

Tones, who had won three years running. Page three carried a huge four-column photo of the glee club, white shirts and bow ties in place, which won best small school, but placed third behind Tulsa Edison and Guthrie for state. This very credible showing pleased the kids, but Pensotti complained to Ed Carter.

“We were the best. Those Edisons were too loud. Always too loud.”

“Oh, don’t worry, Mister *Maestro*,” Ed Carter said, his arm around the conductor’s shoulder. “They’re a hundred times bigger and they got their own symphony and Lord knows what-all. Besides, I’m already going to have to build a new trophy case as it is. Maybe we’ll beat them next year.”

Aldo Pensotti looked absently across the pretty green campus. “Yes, maybe. Who knows? But maybe next year the war will be done at last.” He smiled broadly. “And maybe next year I will again be in my Italy, with my new bride, Deanna Durbin, on my side—do you say ‘on my side’?”

By far Connie and Tom’s favorite times together were Saturday afternoons. Tom would trade with Floyd for the Pontiac, with its big back seat and fishing pole radio antenna that could pick up every station from Oklahoma City to Del Rio. Then he’d grab Vito at the camp and the two of them would escort Connie and Oklahoma Garland to one picnic spot or another—often to the picturesque and remote Lover’s Leap on a hill overlooking the Canadian River. Tom thought that after he finished his book on salutes, he might write one about lover’s leaps, which every town in America seemed to have at least one of, complete with stories of sobbing Indian maidens and love-addled suitors.

Each week Oklahoma filled a large wicker picnic basket with, as Floyd often put it, “enough food to feed Cox’s Army.”

“Or Tom, Pete and you,” Oklahoma said, for Pete and Mary Beth often joined them on those romantic outings. Floyd, too, although he was spending more and more time with his girlfriend in Dustin, now that the motor pool and classrooms had been finished.

The elaborate and almost ritualistic picnic spread would be laid out near the car. This was Oklahoma Garland’s time to play hostess, maybe to give Vito a preview of her wifely skills, and she excelled. Real cloth napkins, fried chicken, deviled eggs, bowls of coleslaw, potato salad and cold baked beans, cheese and grapes, sometimes cantaloupe brought up

from Texas, tumblers of lemonade, and Ennio's fresh bread set the stage for the feast that would soon segue into opera time.

"That was, let's see, um, the pinnacle of your picnicking prowess, Oklahoma," Pete said. "That's called alliteration, by the way. Mary Beth is making me study in those little blue books while I'm sitting around here waiting for the garlic to come up. Speaking of which, Tom, can I rent out your men again to pick the garlic? I'm probably going to need fifty men or so for a couple of weeks. And give me some hearty ones, will you? If you think garlic was fragrant going in, wait 'til you get a whiff of it coming up."

"That's not going to be so easy, Pete," Tom said, examining a carrot stick in thought. "I'd actually forgotten the men had planted the garlic for you last fall. That seems half a lifetime ago, and the men were still prisoners. But all the men are in the Army now, getting paid monthly salaries, with regular duties. You may have to use the German P.O.W.s from McAlester or Deep Fork." When he saw Pete's scowl, Tom added, "Look, I'm just thinking with my mouth open, as usual. I guess I pretty much got you into all this; I'll figure something out. Don't worry. Now get yourselves settled, everybody. It's almost air time, as Bob Hawks would say."

Precisely at two o'clock, Tom opened the doors to the Pontiac, turned on the engine, and then tuned the radio to that Tulsa University station for the Texaco-sponsored broadcasts of the Metropolitan Opera from New York. Tom had gotten a schedule of the full spring season from a Texaco filling station in Henryetta so Vito and Oklahoma could order a copy of the *libretto* and study it, just like Vito said the old men in Verona used to do. If the opera wasn't too demanding, like *La Boheme* or *Carmen*, they would often sing along, the love duets and the occasional solo, although Vito would sometimes send them both into convulsive laughter by ad-libbing suggestive, sometimes flat-out naughty, lyrics.

That dogwood-laden Saturday they'd coaxed Floyd to join them. The picnickers were lazing in post-cherry cobbler stupor as Vito sang a particularly ribald version of "*La Donna E Mobile*".

"If I had known that you could get away with singing stuff like that in opera, I might have started liking it sooner," Tom said at intermission. All during the first act, Pete would rise on one elbow and whisper the translation into the eager ear of Mary Beth Devine, who would invariably

slap him on the arm and then tenderly rub the spot away. "What about you, Floyd?" Tom asked. "I bet after all these years working with Oklahoma, you must be quite a buff. And you ought to bring that lady you got hidden away down there in Dustin to the picnic sometimes. Maybe she'd like opera, too."

"She might at that," Floyd said slowly. "As for me, I'm kinda still in the first grade on that sort of singing, and I may be getting too big for my desk. Miss Garland, you know how much I'm proud of your musical talents, but to be honest, I can listen to opera, but I can't seem to hear it right. I think when I was over in France and those Germans shot me in the head, they must have knocked out my opera piece. I really enjoy Murray's piano playing and a lot of that stuff on the radio, Mister Chopin and all, but opera sounds to me mostly like two people shouting at each other. I did like that humming one, though, Vito."

Vito laughed and put his arm around Oklahoma as they shared a corner of the picnic blanket. "Well, that's a start, Floyd. Maybe it helps to speak Italian. To Pete, and now Tom and me, arias in most operas are as easy to understand as Judy Garland singing "Over the Rainbow" is to you. Of course, my brilliant Miss Garland here learned them all phonetically, but we can't all be Oklahoma Garlands."

Oklahoma put her hand on Connie's. "What about you, hon? You seem to enjoy it. Do you?"

"It's so beautiful it makes me cry sometimes," Connie said. "Of course the words always sounded like 'tutu tralala' to me, but I got it in my head to just think of the singers as gorgeous musical instruments, and I don't know how to speak trombone, either. But I sure would like to see an opera in person. Promise me, Tom, that when we get to Italy we can go to a lot of operas, okay? Vito's Arena Theater and—what's that other one?—La Scala?"

Pete jumped excitedly to his feet. "I'll tell you what. When this damn war is over, we'll all go to Italy, okay? Rome, Milano, Venice, and Verona, of course. What do you say, Mary Beth? Will you come to Italy with me, *mi amore*?"

"Of course I will, silly. But I should warn you. I've never even been to Krebs yet. Wewoka is as far as I've gotten. I don't know how good a traveler I'll be."

Pete was almost dancing. "You'll be fine, sweetheart. What about you, Floyd? You come, I'll pay the passage. And that includes your mystery gal in Dustin, too."

“Mighty kind of you, Pete, but my traveling shoes are put away forever. I’m happy as a pig in clover right here. And Viola—that’s the name of my woman, Viola Tiger—well, she thinks even a trip to Weleetka is like pulling teeth. She likes her little cabin down by the river and would just as soon never set foot off her porch for the rest of her natural-born life.” Floyd paused and looked into his hands. “She doesn’t speak a word of English and doesn’t want to. No offense, ‘cause she’s a real sweet woman, but she’s not all that partial to white people. I think something might have happened to her way back when. She tells me that most white men are just thieving skunks and drunkards.” He looked back up at Tom. “And at least sometimes, she might have a point. Lieutenant, I was going to tell you this later so as not to ruin the picnic, but now’s as good a time as any, I guess. I had a cousin go up to Drumright the other day to get some of that bootleg Choctaw beer, and guess who he saw running bottles for the bootlegger? Skeeter. He’s back.”



Tom came storming out of his office, waving a long scroll of teletype paper at the startled soldiers in the administration building.

“Can someone explain what the by-God blue blazes this is supposed to mean? Rob, did you read this?”

Rob Luke, Private Connelly and Murray Lipton sat at their desks, frozen in surprise, and maybe just a little fear. In the year they had worked under Tom, they had never seen him angry, not even when Plutarco was killed. Now he was furious, and seemed to have added a couple of inches to his already six-foot frame.

Rob got to his feet. “I’m sorry, To—er, Lieutenant Gregory. Did I miss something? It came in this morning two bells,”—referring to communications from Camp Gruber headquarters—“but nothing urgent. The top order was about appropriate uniform wear when on furlough. If there had been something important, it would have been three bells, at least, so I just ripped it off the machine and put it on your desk as usual.”

Seeing the pain and confusion in Rob’s eyes, Tom calmed down. “Aw, it’s not your fault, Rob. Stuff about us is always backwater, I guess. It’s the fifth one down. I’m not surprised you missed it. Listen up. ‘Memo from the Director, Prisoner of War Operations Division O.P.M.G. 17 April 1944 N.A.R.G. 59: Effective immediately, all individual passes for members of Italian Service Units are revoked. All I.S.U. servicemen, officers and enlisted men alike, will venture off base or camp only in groups of four or more and always under the armed supervision of regular U.S. Army personnel. Any individual I.S.U. member seen off base will be considered absent without leave and subject to punishment under Article 15 of the Uniform Code of Military Justice.’” He looked

up for their reactions and added, "That cold enough for you? Lipton, get Major Appleton on the horn for me will you? I'll be in my office."

As the soldiers sat in stunned silence watching Tom Gregory on the telephone, gesturing, nodding and listening intently, Pete Patterson made his usual ebullient entrance.

"*Paesanos*," he roared cheerfully. "I've come to enlist you into the Order of the Stinking Rose. I've got forty acres of garlic waiting to be plucked from the earth and *Tenente Gregorio* is again coming to my rescue. There's my hero now." He became aware that nobody was listening to him and all were staring in the direction of Tom's office. "Why the long faces? Why is everybody looking at Tom like he's talking to the funeral home? Who *is* he talking to, if that's any of my business?"

Murray Lipton stood and gently escorted Pete to the conference table. "He's talking to Major Appleton up at Gruber. Sorry; it is good to see you again, Pete. The Lieutenant told us about your garlic problem and I've been working on a volunteer duty roster. But to be honest, we don't know what the heck is going on right now. We just got orders all the way from Washington taking away all individual privileges of the Italian soldiers, and we don't know why. Looks like our guys are about to have less freedom than they had as P.O.W.s."

Tom emerged from his office and shook Pete's hand. "Hey, Pete, wait'll you hear this. Murray, do me a favor? Run down and get Sergeant Hare and Sergeant Muñoz and bring them up here, will you? Might as well get the word out as quickly as possible. We'll wait for you."

Jesse, Victor Muñoz and Private Orrin arrived in minutes, accompanied by Aldo Pensotti, who had remained as camp liaison officer.

"Glad you could make it, *Maestro*. You and I will have our hands full explaining this to the men shortly," Tom said. "So here's the deal. I just got off the phone with Major Appleton, and this is what we know. Washington is cutting off all individual I.S.U. privileges and in a number of areas—the West Coast and all along the Eastern seaboard—the Italian soldiers are being confined to base. It appears that the same bias and bullshit we had to go through here last year with Hamby and some of the others is being played out all over again in places that never saw or even knew about the Italians when they were P.O.W.s. So the same arguments about coddling and stealing our girlfriends and stuff are going on again, only louder. Now they got Walter Winchell wading in. The poor

bastards—after doing every single thing our government asked them to do, they get this crap. And according to Major Appleton, in a few places when the Italian soldiers got pushed, they pushed back. A big fight broke out at a theater in Oakland between locals and I.S.U. men, and at the training facility in Atlanta, men with clubs were trying to get on base. And there was a lot of taunting going on both sides.

"So for the next few weeks or months, we're going to have to back off a little. We won our victories here in Weleetka; the townspeople like and respect our men as much as we do. But we don't live on an island. Major Appleton and I agree that we need to cool our heels for a while. God forbid, if even one fistfight broke out at the Royal, something as dumb as a spilled Coke or a box of popcorn, we could be putting thousands of I.S.U. men in jeopardy. So we're going to stick close to home."

Tom smiled and continued, "Come to think of it, Pete, this may be one of those ill winds that blows some good, especially for you and your garlic. If you can wait until the current training cycle is over next week, Aldo and I can ask the men if they wouldn't mind helping you bring in your fragrant harvest. What do you say, Aldo? It should beat hanging around the barracks and playing ping pong in the canteen. I'll order lots of Deanna Durbin movies."

"I'll tell you what," the ever-enthusiastic Pete said. "If you will all pitch in, we'll make it a party. We'll have a Saturday night Garlic Festival, with good food, special coffee and everything. We can finally have that dance the men have been asking for, jitterbugging and stuff."

"How can we do that when we can't go into town?" the *Maestro* asked.

It didn't take long for Pete to come up with a number of ideas. "If we can't bring the men to Weleetka, why not bring Weleetka to Chigger Lake? The training will be over, so we can turn the motor pool into a dance pavilion. Floyd and I can fix it up to look just like that Hollywood Canteen, okay? We'll have a band and a jukebox, I'll bring a bunch of the gals over from Krebs, and Connie can invite some of the nurses from Okmulgee. There, you see, Murray? I don't have a garlic *problem*, I have a garlic *business*."



It was midweek, Connie was still in Okmulgee, and Floyd and Oklahoma Garland had just put the paper to bed. So Tom and Floyd walked down to Mrs. Clark's for some chili and catching up.

They slid into their usual booth by the front door. "So what do you think, Floyd?" Tom asked, slathering a monster slab of cornbread with something that looked suspiciously like lard but tasted pretty good. "Think you can do it?"

Floyd stared into his chili bowl for a second and let out with his bass clef chuckle. Tom thought that was the way a bear would laugh if it could. "Convert the motor pool into a dance pavilion? I'm almost embarrassed to say it, but not only yes, it would be almost too easy. I drew up plans for something exactly like that when we were first building the motor pool. Ever since the Trianon Ballroom burned down back in '39, there hasn't been a place to have a dance and a beer from here to Okmulgee. So I thought that after the war was over, we might as well be able to get some more use out of it. Slap up another wall, add a few toilets, a jukebox, and bingo. Right now it's just a matter of stringing up some lights and building a bandstand. We got plenty of tables and chairs up in the auditorium and I can bring the R..C Cola ice boxes over from the stadium. Hocus-pocus, hum-diddly-ocus."

The little bell over the door tinkled to life, and Okfuskee County Sheriff George Grayson came in. He was holding his Stetson politely in front of him like he was going to church.

"Evening, Mrs. Clark. Evening, everybody." Grayson turned to survey the room. "Hidey, Floyd. Hey, Lieutenant," he said brightly. "They told me I might find you all here. Mind if I take a load off?"

"Please do, Sheriff," Floyd said. "We haven't seen you in forever. You hungry?"

"I might could eat a bite." The Sheriff sat down next to Floyd so he could look Tom straight on.

"The chili's good," Floyd recommended.

"As far as I'm concerned, chili is like beer and women. They're *all* good; some's a little better than others."

Floyd passed him the cornbread basket. "You've never had Mrs. Evans' New Orleans-style chili gumbo, with okra."

Grayson mock-shuddered. "No, and I've never slept with Zazu Pitts, either, but that's my story and I'm sticking to it." He looked

approvingly at the large bowl of chili Mrs. Clark deposited in front of him. "Thanks, Mrs. Clark. Looks good enough to eat." However, he looked at Tom without making any move to begin eating. "Actually, Lieutenant, I came looking to talk to you. Do you think you'd happen to have anything from the time that poor prisoner of yours got killed? Anything that might have fingerprints on it?"

"Gosh, I don't think so. Do you, Floyd? That's been more than six months ago. And it was raining like crazy, if you remember. We had an old pack of cigarettes that might have had a print, but that's long gone, I imagine. Why, what's up, Sheriff?"

"Well, the Army probably figured that a dumb country sheriff like me would take one look around and be done with it, but that one kind of stuck in my craw. We don't have many killings out here, and it was plain to see that Hamby's kid had done it. Even Hamby thought so; you remember. So, ever since, every so often I'd check on Hamby and Mrs. Agee, just kind of passing the time: 'You ever hear anything from the twins?', stuff like that. And sure enough, a couple of months ago, Mrs. Agee says she got a letter from Larry or Barry, one or the other, saying they were in California and thinking about joining the Merchant Marines. So I get in touch with the Merchant Marine base in Long Beach, and they tell me that, yep, all three of them joined up all right, but I was already too late for two of them.

"Seems Little Hamby and Larry Agee got into a hellacious fight with some Mexicans down in San Pedro. Damn near killed a couple of them. The Merchant Marines didn't want any part of those thugs, so they gave them a general discharge and sent them packing. Then the sailor I was talking to asked would it help my investigation any if I had their fingerprints, and I said sure would. So Richard Hamby and Larry Agee are back in Oklahoma, running bootleg hooch up in Stillwater, we think. They think they're free as the breeze, and maybe they are, and maybe they aren't. If I had something with their fingerprints on it from that bible camp, I could nail 'em. And it would give me great pleasure to nail 'em."

"We knew they were back," Floyd said. "My cousin said he saw Skeeter in Drumright. Dumb bunny Agee is probably with him."

"Drumright, huh? That makes sense. Mean men in a mean town. Keep your eyes wide open, will you, Lieutenant? Old Man Hamby told

me that Skeeter has a real hate out for you. Says you cost him his chance to start for O.U. football. I even heard he told anybody who'd listen that you're sitting on more money than Fort Knox out here and that some true-blue Americans should relieve you of your—well, he said your Dago money. Be careful, Lieutenant. If I hear anything more, I'll let you know."



Truckload after truckload of garlic, bulbs as big as baseballs, started rolling out of Weleetka to Pete's brand new Big Red Spaghetti Sauce factory and warehouse in Muskogee. Pete had toyed with the idea of building the plant in Krebs, but his financial backers wanted Tulsa or Oklahoma City. They settled on Muskogee after Pete won the spaghetti sauce contract for the entire 30,000 hungry soldiers at Camp Gruber.

The Italian Service Unit soldiers and the townspeople were just as glad Pete hadn't chosen Weleetka for the warehouse, for even Pete was forced to admit there could be too much of a good thing. Garlic was everywhere. Every day Pete brought in boxes of lemons which, when used with borax soap, cut the garlic scent on hands and clothes—cut, but didn't eliminate.

Driving into the little town, Connie scrunched up her nose. "Whew, Tom, I can't decide whether to ask you to roll up your window or roll it down. This end of the state's getting mighty pungent, but—and I didn't want to mention it at first—what's that aftershave you're wearing, Vampire Flit?" She sighed. "Oh well, I guess it's like living next to the railroad tracks—after a while you don't notice a thing. Kiss me, you fool." She slid across the seat and delivered a wet smack right in the center of Tom's ear.

Tom gripped the wheel and hunched his shoulders, awaiting the next assault. "You keep that up, I'm going to have to put you back in the rumble seat. Of course, then I'd have to get back there with you, and as much fun as that would be, it wouldn't help your poor nose any. But take heart, sweetie, harvest time is just about over. Pete said today might be the last load. You're right about it being like living near the railroad tracks, though; I can barely smell it anymore, and what I do smell is

warm and comfy, like Grandma Gregorio's kitchen. You remind me, though, that the first week I was in Weleetka last year, I thought the whole town kind of smelled like the inside of a new pup tent. I'd never smelled oil wells before, and now I can't smell them or hear them."

"They still sound like money to me, but I'm a city girl. Before you drop me off at Oklahoma's house, can we go out and see what Floyd and Pete are doing to convert the motor pool for the Garlic Festival tomorrow night? I talked to Oklahoma last night on the phone and she told me that the two guys are thinking about buying the motor pool building and turning it into a dance hall when the war is over. Apparently Floyd designed it for that very post-war conversion. He's one smart cookie, that guy."

"He sure is, and when I first got to town, there were some people wanting me to believe he was the next thing to a village idiot. Look, there they are now."

"Who? The people who thought Floyd was an idiot?" she joked, spotting a number of soldiers working on the motor pool building.

"Very funny."

They pulled onto the near-empty motor pool tarmac. Floyd and Pete and at least a dozen others were furiously hammering and painting the hangar farthest from the camp. Those vehicles that could be driven or moved had been pulled to the far end of the training center nearest the barracks. A couple of trucks and a half-track which, as Jesse Hare had predicted had just about been fixed to death, stood festooned in Christmas-tree lights and green, red and white bunting. On the half-track was a carefully hand-painted sign that read "Welcome All Ladies to Chigger Lake Canteen."

Sergeant Muñoz came jogging up to the car. He put his hands on the passenger side window and looked in. "Good evening, Lieutenant Ballard. Thanks for coming straight out." He saw her perplexed look. "You did get my message, didn't you? The hospital said they'd send a runner, but they weren't sure whether you had left or not."

Connie put her hand on Victor Muñoz's arm. "I didn't get any messages, Sergeant. We're here strictly by chance. What's the matter?"

"It's Angelo Festa. His leg got cut real bad on a license plate when we were moving the trailers. We got the bleeding stopped, but he's going to need stitches. He's up in the infirmary. Private Lipton is with him." Sergeant Muñoz opened the door for her and the three started walking briskly up the hill.

They arrived at the infirmary building near the rear of the camp by the canteen and recreation room. The eight-patient infirmary was empty as usual, except for Angelo Festa in a bed by the window, a bloody towel around his leg. Private Murray Lipton sat nearby, humming and occasionally patting the young tenor's shoulder.

"Hi, Lieutenants. We were just playing a game. I'd hum an aria and Angelo would try to name it and the opera. I haven't stumped him yet."

Connie sat down beside the pale Italian soldier. She pulled back the towel. "Well, my singing angel, you did yourself proud here. Get me that wooden box from the shelf over there, would you, Murray? There's some morphine in it, as well as the surgical kit. Angelo, my friend, you may look like Raggedy Andy by the time I'm through, but you're going to be fine. Looks like it missed the tendons, you lucky fellow. We'll have you up and about in a few days."

Murray Lipton set the box at Connie's feet. "Is he going to be able to go to the dance tomorrow night? I know he's been practicing jitter-bugging with a mop all week."

"Sorry, Murray, just not possible." Connie expertly moved the curved surgical needle through Angelo's wound. "He's clearly lost a lot of blood, and I don't want him breaking these stitches when I finish sewing him up. He's going to be laid up in bed for a day or two, and the next couple of days after that I want him off his feet as much as possible." She turned to Tom. "Do you have anybody to stay with him, to give him his medicine, water, food, help him to the bathroom? I hate to ask 'cause I know how much the soldiers have been looking forward to the dance."

"I'll be happy to look out for him," Murray said brightly. "I can't dance, and don't really want to learn, truth be told. Floyd can tell you that I even have two left feet when it comes to stomp dancing. I fell all over Miss Garland in the buffalo dance last year. Besides, maybe I can finally stump him at the aria game."

Connie replaced the little lock on the medicine chest. "You couldn't do the buffalo dance, Murray?" she asked. "That's pitiful, but thanks for staying with Angelo."

Pete had privately told Tom and Floyd that not only was this the first Weleetka Garlic Festival, it would also be the last. "I'm planting over in Texas next season, so I can use the Camp Hereford P.O.W.s. There must be five thousand of them over there now. But that doesn't mean we can't celebrate a job well done this year."

"Probably just as well," Tom replied. "I'm not so sure there will even be a Chigger Lake training center next year anyway. The supply of I.S.U.'s is limited, and there are only so many people we can train. Let's wash the garlic out of our hair and have a party. Eat, drink and dance with Mary, as Tough Tony would say."

True to their word, Pete and Floyd had turned the hangar into as close a facsimile of the Hollywood Canteen as their limited resources would allow. They had pored over *Life Magazine* photos of the original. Jesse Hare showed them how he learned in Honolulu to turn two-by-fours into palm trees with crepe paper and cardboard, and Pete seemed to have an inexhaustible supply of little twinkling lights that turned the cavernous building into a starry night in the tropics.

Little white railings separated the dance floor from the tables and chairs that ringed the bandstand. Tropical island theme or not, the Italians had insisted on the familiar tri-color bunting along the railings and the wall behind the band. "It's okay," Vito said. "Haven't you ever heard of the Isle of Capri?"

At the last minute, Tom told Pete there would be no wine allowed after all. "Look, it's technically illegal in this state, a lot of the gals probably won't be old enough to drink anyway, and with five men to every girl at least, wine would just be asking for trouble. We'll have free soda pop and real coffee and I've asked Ennio to bake up about a million of those cookies the men like so much, what do you call 'em?"

Pete laughed. "*Biscotti*. I understand completely. As long as the men get a chance to talk to, dance with, even smell a real live woman, we could make them stand in line to drink ditch water. And I must point out, I've done pretty good at recruiting the Italian gals at Krebs. I had to invite some of the *nonnas* as chaperones, but the men should be used to being watched by this time."

Because of the no-liquor rule, Ed Carter said it would be okay for Calvin Wickers and trombonist Tommy Brainard from the Lighthorsemen dance band to join Sergio Barbieri and his Italian band

members. The two students had practiced with the men before. They weren't as accomplished as the adults, but their innate understanding of swing made them welcome, and Sergio was proud of them.

At sunset, the Italian servicemen all showed up, standing around, nervously laughing, punching each other on the shoulder, and generally acting like insecure young men going to a dance anywhere in the world.

Connie hugged Tom as they stood off to one side, admiring the setting and realizing that tonight they should stay out of the limelight. "You know, because of Vito and Ennio being older, I forget sometimes that these are mostly just boys. This looks for all the world like a high school prom. They're adorable."

Tom laughed. "Don't let them hear you use that word. I'm sure they all think they look like Cary Grant or Rudolph Valentino. Rob said he had the barbers from Olsen's come out to give the guys haircuts as a special treat. So this garlic festival is going to smell like Dixie Pomade and lilac water."

Oklahoma Garland and her book brigade, including Mary Beth and Lou Ann Devine, Mary Cox, and most of the commissary workers, showed up first. Then Floyd arrived with his giggling group of Creek girls from Dustin. They were as shy as the soldiers, and just as ready for adventure.

Finally a convoy of sedans that looked like something out of a gangster movie pulled onto the tarmac. Pete hopped out of the lead car and opened the back door with a flourish. All the car doors then opened in unison, and out popped more than a dozen of Krebs's finest Italian beauties in their above-the-knee dance skirts; waving, laughing, and talking a mile a minute in Italian. The three scowling *nonnas* in their dark brown dresses solemnly emerged from the cars and took their places at the tables nearest the cookies and coffee, where they would remain for the evening.

Vito walked up and brazenly gave Oklahoma Garland a kiss and hug. "Just listen to the little birds," he exclaimed. "This is the first time the men have heard Italian from the lips of a woman in more than a year."

"Okay, you asked for it, *cara mia*," Oklahoma said. "Shall we go cut a rug?"

The evening started slowly, with most of the soldiers standing on one side of the hangar and the women on the other, creating an energy field of sexual tension worthy of the Grand Cooley Dam. Only the regulars, like Tony Aranetto and Mary Cox, and Pete and Mary Beth, ventured onto the dance floor at first; but the band was excellent and when Sergio and Calvin launched into a driving rendition of "Little Brown Jug" a la Glenn Miller, some of the Italian girls could stand it no longer and started dancing with each other. Then some of the bakers and commissary women started in, and the flood gates broke open. Even Tom gallantly tried on some of the slower numbers, but Connie steered him to the refreshments as an act of kindness.

"Why don't you grab a saxophone, honey? Sergio could always use a third sax."

Tom actually did just that, and with Sergio on clarinet and Calvin on alto, they did a credible "In the Mood" to the wild applause of the men. Then Tom led them in "I'm an Old Cowhand," which he remembered from his Lake Erie dance band days, but when he tried to get them to swing their horns the way he had learned, he let out an ear-piercing squeak that sent him quickly to the sidelines amid good-natured slaps on the back.

The band took a break a little after ten-thirty. Tom, Connie, Floyd, and Aldo Pensotti were standing behind the big drum set drinking sodas when young Calvin Wickers approached.

"Lieutenant, Tommy and I can only stay out 'til eleven. I promised my mom. Have you seen Mister Carter? He's our ride."

"I'll be happy to take you home, Calvin," Floyd said. "Some of my Dustin gals are looking a little tuckered, and I promised Viola I'd get home early."

"We've had kind of a big day, too, Tom," Connie said. "Would you mind? I'd like to check in on Angelo before we go, and then straight to bed."

"Sounds good; and no, I'm not getting any ideas. Maestro, please tell Pete we're going to have to shut this down at midnight. I'm sure the little old ladies are ready for bed, too."

Aldo laughed. "They have been asleep for the past hour, Lieutenant. But you can count on me. Thank you for a wonderful night."

"Maybe we can do it again, and you can invite Deanna Durbin. C'mon, Connie. I'll grab some Cokes for Murray and Angelo, if they're not asleep already."



They waved goodbye to Floyd as he drove his drowsy passengers back to Dustin, and walked slowly up the hill to camp.

The fireflies coming off the lake had recaptured and reconfigured the silent camp as Tom and Connie made their way back to the infirmary.

Tom stopped in his tracks and said, "That's funny."

"What, hon?"

"The door to the canteen is standing wide open and the lights are on. I locked that door myself when I took the lockbox down to the safe in my office." He looked toward his office, then turned back. "Why would Murray even go down there?"

They walked a few more feet across the parade ground when Connie grabbed Tom's sleeve. "What's that over there? Is that someone sleeping there?"

Tom picked up his pace. "There's nobody here but Murray and Angelo—what the hell?"

It was a face-down body whose blood-stained shirt was clearly visible even in the moonless dark. Tom rolled the body over as Connie dropped to her knees to search for a pulse. "It's one of the Agee twins," he said.

"He's dead, Tom." She pointed at the shirt. "Shot twice through the chest."

Tom stood up, squinting at the body. "What the hell would Larry Agee be doing ... oh my God." He broke into a run.

A single bulb dimly lit the infirmary as Tom burst in. He could see Angelo Festa lying on his bed, one arm extended in rigor mortis, blood everywhere.

"Murray! Murray, what happened? Where are you?"

He reached Angelo's bed in three giant strides and, his heart sinking, discovered Murray Lipton sitting on the floor on the other side. The young Private was leaning against the wall, staring straight ahead. Lipton's service revolver was still in his hand, resting in a pool of blood. Connie was by his side now, shouting, "No, Murray, no, Murray, no!"

Tom stood unsteadily. "You don't need to check on Angelo. He's dead, too. Throat's been cut. What about Murray?"

Connie tore Murray's shirt open. Through tears she was able to say, "Stab wounds to the chest. Apparently he was able to shoot one of them before they got to him."

Sergeant Hare came bounding into the room. "What's all the shouting? What's the—oh, shit."

"They're both dead, Jesse," Tom said evenly. "Sound the camp alarm, then go down and call Sheriff Grayson. I've got his home phone number in the book on my desk. Tell him to get right over here; there are three dead people here, including Private Lipton. And tell him to bring his fingerprint kit with him. Tell him this time we should have all the fingerprints he's ever going to need."



Floyd Breedlove walked from the bright morning sun into a crowded and smoke-filled headquarters building. Lieutenant Gregory was in his office with Major Appleton and two other soldiers who looked like M.P.s. Sheriff George Grayson was on the telephone at one of the desks and Sergeant Hare was furiously typing at another, cigarettes overflowing the ashtrays.

Floyd held up a large paper bag with grease stains beginning to show on the bottom. "Good morning, everybody. Viola made us all some fry bread. Hi, Sergeant Hare. What are you doing at Murray's desk? You know he hates that. He'll snatch you bald-headed if he catches you." Floyd was slightly puzzled. "Where is he, anyway? He loves fry bread." He looked around the somber, silent room with growing suspicion. "Everything okay?"

Sheriff Grayson hung up the phone and stared blankly at him, apparently lost in thought.

"Hello, Sheriff Grayson," Floyd said, far more subdued, searching faces for answers. "What are you doing out here so early?"

"Actually I'm still out here so late," Grayson said hoarsely in a voice that was part coffee, part cigarettes, and no sleep.

Tom saw Floyd through the glass walls of his office and slipped past Major Appleton to grasp his friend by the arms and guide him to one of the wooden chairs at the conference table. Floyd started to pull away from Tom's grip, then after looking intently into Tom's face he went slack and sat down.

"What's the matter, Lieutenant? It's Murray, isn't it? Has he been hurt?"

Tom frowned and shook his head. "He's dead, Floyd. I'm so sorry. It happened sometime last night during the dance. Angelo Festa was killed, too. I wanted to tell you earlier, but I knew you were down at Viola's and we don't know exactly where she lives."

Floyd's face remained impassive, but a faint moan escaped his lips. Without changing expression he asked, "Who did it? Skeeter?"

Sheriff Grayson came over and uncharacteristically put his hand on Floyd's shoulder. "Yes he did, Floyd. Apparently he and one of the Agee twins came out here to rob the camp while you guys were having that garlic festival thing. They went into the infirmary to steal the drugs and Private Lipton surprised them, I reckon. They knifed them both to death, Lipton and that Italian kid. But Lipton went down swinging, Floyd. He was able to pull his service revolver before they got him. He shot the Agee guy, two rounds directly in the chest, and it looks like he got a piece of Skeeter, too. We know it was Skeeter 'cause we got his damn fingerprints all over the place."

Floyd's voice was so low they had to lean forward to understand him. "Lot of good that'll do you. If Skeeter did this last night, he'll already be out of state, just like last time."

"Way different deal this time, Floyd," Grayson replied. "They didn't get any money this time, and Lipton got Skeeter. I just hung up the phone with the Sheriff over at Shawnee and they found Skeeter's old man's car at a farm on the other side of town, out of gas. There was blood on the front seat and two of those morphine sticks laying on the seat. Farmer said one of his horses is missing. So he's still around, wounded, doped up and on horseback. We got him this time."

"We'll have M.P.s combing the state," Tom said. "We've got a couple of them on their way to Drumright and we'll hook up with all the city police forces."

Floyd's eyes were hooded in their hickory frame. "No offense, Lieutenant, but your soldier boys are amateurs; pretty good at breaking up bar fights and bringing in drunks, but they're no match for Skeeter. You won't find him either, Sheriff. Skeeter was born hunting in the woods. He's got a horse, he's got a knife, and he's dangerous as a cottonmouth. No sir, you won't find him. But I will."

Floyd stood. "I'm going out to talk to Mister Hamby, Lieutenant. Your welcome to come along."



Tom and Floyd pulled into Ham Hamby's driveway. They parked behind a highly-polished, but five-year-old Dodge sedan.

"Wow," Tom whistled, trying to strike up a conversation. "If even H. Everett Hamby can't get a new car, there must really be a war going on. Suppose he'll be glad to get his old car back, blood stains and all."

Floyd remained as stone cold silent as he had been since they left the camp. He got out of the Ford and strode resolutely to the Hamby porch, Tom scrambling to catch up in his wake. Floyd knocked on the door, hard, then retreated three steps.

A sleep-deprived and annoyed Ham Hamby opened the front door. "Lieutenant Gregory? Bree—ah, Floyd. What do you want now? I told the Sheriff last night on the telephone that I haven't seen hide nor hair of Richard since he damn near killed me and stole my car last winter. You know he's long gone by now."

Floyd remained absolutely silent, devoid of emotion, looking at Hamby like you might look at a rock or a tree.

Tom stepped toward Hamby. "Well, that's why we are here, sir. They just found your car in Shawnee, abandoned, so your son is still around here somewhere. There were blood stains on the front seat, so we're afraid he might be wounded. We wanted you to know because he may try to circle back this way. He's armed and dangerous, he's killed at least two people, and you and I both know there's a good chance it's probably more than that, Mr. Hamby."

Hamby slumped against the large door jamb. "Are you sure he did it? Killed those two people?"

"Yes, sir. When your son was in California he joined the Merchant Marines, and we matched his service fingerprints with the dozens of prints we got at the camp. Your son is guilty, all right."

"So what's going to happen if you catch him?" Hamby asked in a weary voice.

"Sir, I'm sorry to inform you that killing a United States serviceman on a federal installation is a capital offense. When we catch him, Skeeter will get a fair trial by a military court, but I must warn you that he will very likely be facing the death penalty. He probably knows this, and

knows he has nothing to lose. That makes him even more dangerous. Please be careful, Mister Hamby.”

The fat man turned to Floyd and, surprising Tom, flashed some of his old pompous anger. “And what are you doing here, Breedlove? Come to gloat?”

Floyd stood perfectly erect, both arms at his sides. “No, Mister Hamby. This is a very painful time for you. I know, because this is a very painful time for me. I have come to speak to you in truth and respect.

“Like most men, I dreamed of having many sons. But it was not to be. My wife and young son died of the measles, many years ago. I hardened my heart. Then last year I met Murray Lipton, who would have been about my son’s age. He didn’t think of me as his father, of course, he already had one; but I grew to think of him as my son. We hunted together; we fished together. He played me many beautiful songs and taught me many things. He learned from me, too, the way a son learns from a father, by watching and learning. He learned my Indian ways, learned many Creek words. Last month I gave him his secret battle name. He was my son.”

Hamby kept silent out of curiosity and confusion. Floyd continued, “And now your son has killed my son in cold blood. Listen to me carefully. I come to honor you and your clan, if you have any, to tell you that I must take your son’s life. Your son is a mad dog, and mad dogs must be put down. The Army won’t find your son. I will find your son, and when I find him, I will kill him. I will understand if you will then think you need to kill me back, but this cannot be changed. Your son is a dead man now. It is time for you to sing your death songs.”

He stepped off the porch, but instead of returning to Tom’s car, he kept walking until he disappeared behind a stand of sycamores.

Floyd had left the fishing pole-adorned Pontiac at the camp, so the next day Tom drove it back to Oklahoma Garland’s house. Oklahoma and Connie were sitting on the big front porch swing, doing cross-stitching and listening to the blue jays. When Tom got on the porch, Connie led him to the swing and sat him down between them.

“Thanks for bringing back the car, Tom,” Oklahoma said. “One of these days I guess I’m going to have to learn how to drive that damn thing, not that I would have any idea where I’d go if I did.”

“Did you finally get some sleep, hon?” Tom asked Connie.

“Off and on, sort of like you, I suppose,” she said quietly, looking down at her lap. “They both just keep coming back, dead, alive, playing the piano, bleeding to death. It’s hard to close my eyes.” She raised her gaze to meet his. “You haven’t said anything, so I assume they haven’t found Skeeter yet.”

“No, and now Floyd’s gone missing too. And he was right about the M.P.s: their idea of looking for Skeeter is calling me every hour and asking me when they can come pick him up. Every sheriff, police station and Oklahoma Highway Patrolman has Skeeter’s picture and fingerprints, but Sheriff Grayson says that Skeeter will probably stick to the woods, and he’ll have to screw up again, steal something and get caught or we’re going to have to get mighty lucky.”

Oklahoma continued her sewing. “Don’t worry. Floyd will find him,” she said.

Tom slowly shook his head. “I don’t know. How can he? Skeeter could be anywhere within fifty miles of here, and Floyd is just one man.”

“That’s just the point, Tom. He’s not alone. The lighthorsemen—the real lighthorsemen, the Creek police—are with him, and they’re everywhere. Ed Carter told me that he and the other chiefs met last night and they’ve made this the top priority of the entire Creek police force. The lighthorsemen are trackers; that’s what they do. And they’ll start where regular police stop: in the brush arbors, ravines, along streams and ponds, places a man on the run might feel safe. They’ll catch him, and they’ll bring him to Floyd. What Floyd does then will be up to him.”

The following Saturday was market day in Weleetka and the little town was filled with pickup trucks and country folk. Men leaned on fifty-pound sacks of flour in the backs of their wagons, rolling their own Bugle Boy cigarettes or thoughtfully biting off a chunk of Red Man chewing tobacco, laying bets on whether they’d bring Skeeter in or just shoot him on the spot. Smart money said that if he’d been Indian they might shoot him, but being white, they’d most likely try to bring him in.

Tom and Connie were in the newspaper office, helping Oklahoma break down last week’s galleys and sort the headline type and artwork back into their proper boxes. Oklahoma had hired a Linotype operator from Tahlequah until Floyd showed up again, but she’d cut the paper

down to four pages anyway. She'd written an editorial about the Camp Chigger Lake murders, but out of respect for Ham Hamby, made no mention of Skeeter. "That will come when it comes," she said.

Quietly lost in thought, the three of them jumped when the bell over the door jingled.

Standing at the front counter was Ed Carter with a tiny, pretty woman. She wore a light shawl over her head—not for warmth, Tom could see in her eyes, but on the off chance it might make her invisible. Ed Carter held the little woman with a protective arm around her shoulders.

Ed began, "Good afternoon, Lieutenant Gregory. They told me I could find you here. Hi, everybody."

Oklahoma rushed up to the small frightened woman. "Viola, is that you? Oh, Viola, have you seen Floyd? Is he all right?" She looked to Carter. "What does she say, Ed?"

"Yeah, look, Viola just came over to my house to tell me that Floyd stayed at her place last night, and he's got Skeeter with him." Carter patted Viola's shoulder. "She's scared. Said Floyd had dead eyes. He took off with Skeeter at first light, so she came straight away to tell me. She had to walk all the way from Dustin."

"Mister Carter, does she know where they went? Did Floyd say anything?" Tom asked.

"Well, yeah, but it doesn't make a hell of a lot of sense to me. Sometimes Creek to English isn't so easy. She thinks Floyd was taking Skeeter to 'Jesus land' to kill him. That ring any bells?"

Tom's eyes widened in recognition. "I'm pretty sure it does. He's taking Skeeter back to where he committed his first murder. Connie, do me a favor. Please call Sergeant Hare and tell him to meet me at the old Baptist Bible Camp at the other end of the lake where we found Plutarco." He grabbed his garrison cap and started out the front door.



Mottled shafts of evening sunlight gave the old bible camp an almost spiritual glow the humble buildings themselves could never have hoped to achieve. Tom pulled his car up to the same worn-out chapel where they'd found that old man praying more than six months earlier. Floyd was sitting on the second step of the little porch, whittling.

"Evening, Lieutenant. I kind of reckoned you'd be the first one to figure out where I'd be. Got time to sit a spell?"

Tom craned his head, taking a look around. "Sure, Floyd. Thank you. Glad to see you're all in one piece."

Floyd regarded the stick in his hand. "When I was a lot younger, I was pretty good at carving whistles and flutes and such. I'd give them to my little boy. He sure liked them. It's a beautiful evening, isn't it? They don't get a lot better than this, not to my way of thinking."

They were quiet for a while. Floyd folded his pocket knife, stuck it in his watch pocket and began idly tapping the stick against the side of his boot, unconsciously falling into the ancient rhythm of a stomp dance.

Tom couldn't remain patient any longer. "Is Skeeter here, Floyd? If he is, I need to take him back to stand trial."

Floyd nodded his head to one of the cabins up the hill. "He'll keep. I wouldn't mind talking a little bit more, if that's all right with you."

Tom didn't respond at first, just sighed heavily. "I hope you didn't kill him," he said finally.

"You know, it's a funny thing, death," Floyd said dreamily, avoiding Tom's query. "The closer you come to it, the more beautiful life becomes. When I got wounded over at Chateau Thierry? It was one of the ugliest days this world has ever conjured up. It was just muck and mud, mud everywhere. All the trees had been shot to pieces 'til they

were just sticks, dead animals were everywhere, people were hanging on the barbed wire, screaming for their mammas, the mud smelled like blood and shit, and the whole world was brown.

“When I got hit, I fell face-down in the mud, but to my amazement, it didn’t hurt. And even though I couldn’t move at first, I could see everything real clear. I guessed maybe I was dead, but my soul hadn’t figured out a place to light yet. Then right in front of my face I saw the most beautiful thing. It was a great big ol’ beetle, walking and shaking his spindly legs, kind of dainty. I thought it was funny, like a good-looking woman in new shoes trying to miss a mud puddle. I didn’t know what kind of bug he was, but then the sun came out a little and he had the most beautiful sparkly purple and green back. He was so gorgeous; I didn’t want to ever stop looking at him. Then I started thinking that was the whole idea—your last seconds ought to be your best.”

“So were Skeeter’s last seconds his best?”

“I’m getting there, Lieutenant, I’m getting there. Stick with me. So anyway, yeah, that was part of my thinking. Some of the lighthorsemen found him day before yesterday in a smelly old corn crib the other side of Wetumka. That would mean he had double-backed this way, all right. When they handed him over to me, boy, I sure wanted to kill him right then and there. My blood was up. But then I got thinking that Skeeter hadn’t allowed Murray or Angelo or poor old Plutarco any beauty at all when he killed them. Murray and Angelo died looking at Skeeter holding a hunting knife, and Lord knows what Plutarco was thinking, if he had anything left to think with.

“So I borrowed that old pickup over yonder and drove him back to Viola’s to think on it some. I decided to take him out here, to remind him where he beat Plutarco to death. And I wanted to tell him stories about Murray, the son he killed. Besides, it’s pretty out here and mad as I was, I decided to give Skeeter what he hadn’t given Murray—those last beautiful seconds.”

Floyd snorted. “I talked to him all day just about, telling him about how beautiful Murray played the piano, how smart he was about poems and everything, how beautiful Angelo sang that church song. Then I told him I was going to have to kill him, even though it was probably going to mean I would go to prison myself. I told him to look for beautiful things, like that crepe myrtle over there or the weeping willow down by the lake. And all the while, hour after hour, all that whiny little

snot-nosed coward would say was it wasn’t his fault, Murray wasn’t supposed to be there, his daddy would pay me big money to let him go, so forth and so on. Not a second of ‘I’m sorry.’

“Then, I don’t know, sometime early this afternoon, I guess, I ran out of words and just started looking at him. And I thought, well, hell, I’m not going to rot in jail for this guy. Lieutenant, it dawned on me that Skeeter couldn’t feel beauty if it got shoved up his ass, no offense. So no, I didn’t kill him. He’s up there in the far cabin. I had to knock him out to stop his screaming, but he’s alive all right.”

Tom slumped back against the step, relaxing his long frame for the first time that afternoon. “Oh thank God, Floyd, thank God. You can leave him to me. The Army’s got big plans for that man.” Tom paused, something having popped into his head. “Um, you had to knock him out to stop his screaming?”

Floyd actually laughed, but it wasn’t the kind of laugh Tom felt like joining. “Uh huh. I let him live, but if you’re an Indian, you could understand that what I did might be worse.” Seeing Tom’s confused look, Floyd continued calmly. “Do you know why a lot of Indian tribes used to scalp their enemies, even after they’re dead? The scalps aren’t like souvenirs, the way lots of white folks think. It’s to disfigure their enemy so his ghost won’t be whole and he can’t join his ancestors. So I took something from Skeeter. After the Army executes him, his ghost is going to have to stay right here, wandering around in a ghost fog with other ghosts, scared all the time, never knowing exactly where they are.”

Tom sat bolt upright. “Did you scalp him? He can’t still be alive if you scalped him.”

“No, I didn’t scalp him. This is the twentieth century, after all.” He gave a noncommittal shrug. “I just cut off his nose. He’s all yours, Lieutenant—at least, most of him is.”



On June 8, 1944—after a week at Camp Gruber with Major Appleton, filling out papers concerning Murray Lipton and Angelo Festa, and sitting through a mostly perfunctory hearing on the capture and arrest of Richard “Skeeter” Hamby—Tom was able to finally get a day alone with Connie Ballard.

He bought a picnic basket and a tablecloth, and—aware of his lack of culinary skills—had Carnations box up two fried chicken dinners, which he augmented with fresh peaches and cherries. This picnic wasn’t really about food, however, as he and Connie both knew.

Tom picked Connie up at the hospital. In the car she asked him, “What’s the latest about Skeeter? Are they going to hang him?”

“Either that or a firing squad. He’s on his way to the military prison at Fort Leavenworth right now, under heavy guard.”

“Did anybody say anything about his ... you know...?”

“His nose? Not a lot. I listed it as ‘severe facial abrasions occurring during capture.’ I heard Skeeter yelling about it once, and an M.P. said, ‘Where you’re headed, buddy, your nose is going to be the least of your concerns.’ One of the M.P.s told me they’d do their best to keep him alive until the trial, but that was it. I guess with thousands of fine men dying in Normandy and all over the Pacific every day, it’s hard to muster up much sympathy for a stateside soldier killer.”

They drove a few miles outside of Okmulgee to the beautiful old Civil War parade grounds at Council Hill. Tom set up a picnic camp on one edge of the field where there was a shady crab apple grove and a small swift-moving stream.

“Tom, you never cease to amaze me,” Connie said, sitting on a large rock and moving her bare feet back and forth in the stream. “Did you go

down to Carnations and pick these box lunches out all by yourself? I think you've got 'homemaker' written all over you."

"Actually the camp commander's wife was a big help." He smiled. "I love you, First Lieutenant Ballard. Have I told you that before?"

"Certainly not today, and now the hole in my heart has been filled."

Tom took his shoes off, too, and they kissed passionately, standing ankle-deep in the clear gravelly stream.

Connie pulled away at last and looked questioningly into Tom's eyes. "Why is it, the better the kiss, the more serious you look when it's over?"

"Do I?" Tom laughed. "I'll have to work on that. You're such a good kisser, I'm surprised I don't just burst into tears of joy every time. Come on over here and sit beside me, honey. I need to talk to you about the war."

"Isn't it amazing, sweetheart? The invasion of Normandy is all everybody at the hospital can talk about. I think this is the beginning of the end, Tom, I really do. They were saying this may all be over.... Oh, my, this is going to be *the talk*, huh? Well, I can't say I wasn't expecting it. Ever since New Year's Eve, I could see there was an itch you hadn't been able to scratch."

Tom took Connie's hand as she grew silent in anticipation. "Hon, there's no other way to say this than to say it. I've been hunkered down with Major Appleton for the past two days and, although the war's not over, not even close, Camp Chigger Lake is—or soon will be."

"I'm not sure I understand, Tom. I thought Chigger Lake was one of the top I.S.U. training centers in the United States."

"It is, I'm proud to say. But they're closing them all down in September—Atlanta, Fort Meade, Ogden—all of them. There just aren't any more I.S.U. men left to train. You are getting more and more German prisoners pouring in here every day, there's a new camp opening up in Bixby this month, but there haven't been any new Italians brought to America since last September and there never will be any more. Most of the I.S.U. men are settled in now—one company here, two companies there—in every fort, camp and naval yard in the country. Your hospital workers will stay, housed at Camp Gruber, but all my other guys are going to be reassigned, scattered like chaff in the wind. I think I've got Vito, Aldo and most of the chorus transferring to the Brooklyn Navy Yards, which should tickle Vito. Rob's going to close up the camp, and

then he'll go to the Enemy Prisoner of War Information Bureau in Washington. Funny, isn't it? That's where I'd told Murray he should go, to straighten things out."

Connie was quietly crying, clasping and unclasping her hands, smoothing her skirt, making no pretense to hide her tears.

"I'm sorry, sweetheart," Tom told her. "I shouldn't have brought Murray up."

"It's not that. You might as well go ahead and drop the other shoe. Where are you going, and will I fit in your duffle bag?"

He hugged her and put his head against hers the way he used to do at the picture show. Her natural fragrance overwhelmed him as always, and a wave of loneliness rolled over him even with Connie still in his arms.

"Although the news pretty much got lost in the shuffle because of D-Day, four days ago the Allied forces retook Rome," Tom said. "The Italian government is relocating from Naples back to Rome right now. And hon, we're going to need Italian-speaking officers to act as liaison to the new government. And that's where I come in. Connie, I've got orders to join a replacement regiment of the Forty-Fifth Division heading to Naples. I'll be assigned to headquarters battalion as liaison officer to the Italian Ministry of Information." He cleared his throat and tried to lighten the mood. "Funny, isn't it? Here everybody at Chigger Lake is dying to get home and can't, and I get to go based on what I learned from them."

Connie looked hopefully into Tom's eyes. "So you're going to close up the camp and go over in September?"

"No, darling, Rob's going to clean up here. He's much better at paperwork than I am, anyway. In order to get this assignment, and it's a fantastic assignment, I have to leave when the division is leaving."

"Which is what day, exactly?"

"June twenty-third. I've got two weeks leave, and then I hook up with the Forty-Fifth at Newport News."

Connie had curled into his embrace and began pounding gently on his chest in the charade of anger lovers often use. "I'm proud of you Tom; more proud than I can say. And I know, no matter what you say, that by going to Italy, you'll be putting yourself in harm's way." She gently pushed herself away and flashed him that crinkly-eyed smile that never failed to steal his breath away. "But if you get over there and get

hurt, don't think for a minute that I'll pull one of those Guinevere to a nunnery deals. I'll be at your side, and that's that."

"Good point," said Tom Gregory, and drew her mouth to his.

EPILOGUE



In one of World War II's minor ironies, members of the Italian Service Units proved so useful to the Army that they were kept in service and not allowed to return to Italy even though the war in Europe ended. It wasn't until February 1946 that President Truman signed legislation securing the Italians' return.

After a month-long layover in England, Vito D'Amico finally disembarked in Naples. Captain Tom Gregory and Oklahoma Garland were waiting for him at the dock. Oklahoma and Vito were married in Verona in June 1946, just in time for the summer season at the Arena Opera. In 1947, Vito and Oklahoma returned to the United States, where he was named general manager of the fledgling Dallas Opera Company. Oklahoma D'Amico became the music critic for the Dallas *Morning News*.

Petty Officer Dale Garland was among two thousand prisoners found alive in a Japanese prison camp in Manila in 1945. At the time of his release, he weighed ninety-four pounds. He returned to Weleetka and with his new partner, Floyd Breedlove, continued to publish the Weleetka *American* until Breedlove's death in 1969.

Corporal Joseph "Big Boy" Atubby served as a rifleman in the Battle of the Bulge and other campaigns. He was awarded the Purple Heart and the Army Commendation Medal for meritorious service. He returned to Weleetka and the Atubby farm.

Pete Patterson and Mary Beth Devine were married on the Patterson family farm just outside of Krebs in September 1945. They had six children, five girls and a boy. They never made it to Italy.

Somewhat to his own surprise, Tom Gregory decided to stay in the Army and in Italy after the war. Assigned to the Office of War Information, his efforts with the Italian Ministry of Information in

rebuilding the country's radio broadcast operations were so exceptional he was asked to join Voice of America, first in London, then New York. Tom stayed with Voice of America and later the United States Information Agency, becoming head of the latter in 1962.

Connie resigned her commission at war's end and joined Tom in Rome. They were married in Verona in August 1946, with Vito and Oklahoma as best man and maid of honor. When they moved to New York, Connie became a nutritionist for the City of New York. In 1952 she began a weekly fifteen-minute radio show on WNYC called *Cookin' with Connie*, filled with healthy recipes, homespun humor, and prairieland observations that New Yorkers couldn't get enough of. Later expanded to half an hour, it ran for seventeen years.

Tom and Connie had two children: Elizabeth (named after Connie's mother) and Murray.

In 1968, Tom and Connie returned to Weleetka for the twenty-fifth anniversary of their first arrival. Except for the stone administration building that had been converted into the Lake Weleetka Rod and Gun Club, not a trace of Camp Chigger Lake remained.

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The author wishes to extend to newly-minted grandson, Connor Shakely, the fervent hope that the only wars he ever knows are in the pages of novels such as this.

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